WESTERN Adventures

A STREET & SMITH PUBLICATION

Flaming Guns and Crimson Trails Mean

BEEF FOR BORDER RAIDERS

Range-mystery novel by
WALKER A. TOMPKINS

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10c APRIL • 1941

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WESTERN Adventures

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NEXT ISSUE ON SALE WEDNESDAY APRIL 2, 1941 10c per COPY

All stories in this magazine are fiction. No actual persons are designated either by name or character. Any similarity is coincidental.

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The Home Corral

WE want to thank Mark Fall for the following letter which he's just sent us from Youngstown, Ohio:

Congrats on your new bimonthly, Western Adventures. Wish it was a monthly. Ed Earl Repp is one of my favorite Western authors as is also Walker Tompkins. Next to William McLeod Raine, F. R. Pierce, Bennett Foster, Luke Short, L. L. Foreman, Walt Coburn, W. C. Tuttle, Eli Colter, William Colt MacDonald, Bristow Green, Peter Dawson and Seth Ranger.

Hope you will include these Western favorites in Western Adventures and make it a monthly with 120 pages each month. With the two novels, four shorts and a novelette it would be yours truly's favorite Western spread. And I bet two bits that it would also be the favorite of fellers calling at The Home Corral.

That's mighty nice goin', Mark, and you sure have picked the cream of Western writers on your list! We're right glad that we include some of 'em and here's hoping we can add others as we go along. Glad you like the mag so much (you're trailing along with a goodly bunch of our readers who want to see W. A. go monthly, brother). We're just a button yet, far as magazines go, you know, but give us a chance. At any rate we're goin' to do our dangedest to give you a magazine you'll be proud and pleased to have and one in which you'll find the best of top-hand Western entertainment.

And Frank Sieverson, whose home is in Minneapolis, Minnesota, doesn't think, as he puts it, we're giving the variety of stories we promised our readers in the first issue of W. A. He writes:

When I read your first issue of W. A., I was mighty pleased to see that you said you would give your readers "stories which were different" and had unusual surroundings. The first issue was O. K., but since then it seems to me that you've gone back to the straight cattle yarns in the other issues. Why can't we have more stories like TERROR OF THE TRAPS, which you had in that first issue. It was by Clint Stone, I think. I liked that very much and got a thrill out of it. I don't see why you don't have more stories of the sea—after all that one by Stone about the salmon traps comes under the heading of a Western adventure and I'll bet a lot of the readers would like more of them just as I do. So, please, Mr. Editor, give us more stories like that for they are different from the usual ones. I am still reading the magazine because it has good action yarns, but I still think you can improve on your variety of stories.

Well now, Frank, of course there's always room for improvement. We wonder how some of our other ridin' pards feel about sea stories. We had quite a bunch of letters about that little old salmon yarn—some thought it was *bueno* and others didn't think it belonged to the magazine. We agree with Frank—and those who found Clint Stone's story entertaining. We felt like Frank, here, that it was Western and it was adventure. And after all that's the title of your magazine. We'd be mighty pleased to hear from some of you other boys and girls as to

whether or not you'd like to have some more rousing adventure yarns of those West coast waters. So, come up augurin', *compadres,* and we'll see if we can't get together.

Mary Lynch of Butte, Montana, goes for W. A. in a big way, but she has the same idea so many of our readers have that our magazine should be published more often. Says Mary:

I'm a great Western story fan and read just about every Western magazine on the newsstands. I just finished reading my first copy of Western Adventures and it now heads the list as my favorite magazine. I notice from reading The Home Corral in the February issue that I missed a couple of copies of this swell magazine. Is it too late to get them? If the stories are half as good as the ones in this February issue, boy, I don't want to miss them! I only have one fault to find with Western Adventures, and that is that it comes out only every two months. I don't understand why you don't publish such a fine Western book more often —every month wouldn't be too much to meet up with such swell authors as Perry Westwood, Rolland Lynch and Lee Floren. How about it, Mr. Editor?

We're right glad you like W. A. so much, Mary, and sure hope you'll always find it tops on your list. And let us assure you that you can always meet up with top-hand writers in Western Adventures. Why, those hombres consider this their home spread.

Ed Earl Repp, whose stories have made such a hit with you all, wrote us not so long ago that he'd had himself a *pasear* down in the Southwest. He allows as how he goes in a big way for New Mexico and Arizona—particularly the Indian country, with Zuni and the other old pueblos. Tales go, he says, that in some of that back country "you can still lose your hair if you ain't keerful." Seems like the last time he was down thataway he found the hub of an old Conestoga wagon along the Santa Fe Trail—which is still visible and in places is a hundred feet wide and deeply rutted. "But," Ed says, "I had to lug that fifty-pound hub (water soaked) for two miles back to the highway. I'm having a desk lamp made out of it."

We thought you'd be interested in this bit of news because it sort of explains why that top-hand writer is a top hand. He's the sort of hombre who knows his West firsthand. Reckon that's why his yarns are so real. Ed's sure building up a big tally of admirers on W. A.—and for good reason. And we know that lamp is going to be a honey! Maybe he'll be writing one of our stories by its light.

Here's a little lady from Selma, Alabama, who likes W. A. because there's romance enough in the stories to satisfy her. Sue Benton puts it this way:

I read a lot of Western magazines because I like the kind of stories I find in them, but I'll have to admit that what made me pick Western Adventures instead of any of the other magazines on the newsstand was its good-looking cover. I guess that's a pretty feminine reason for buying a magazine, but I'm glad to say that the stories inside didn't let me down a bit. They were all tops and what I appreciated especially was the fact that several of them had some romantic interest. After all, women played their part in Western life, too, and I think an occasional girl in a Western story makes it more realistic and interesting. DEATH WATCH IN THE SHOSHONES, by Perry Westwood, is a good example of what I mean.

Good luck with your new magazine—I'll be watching for it on the newsstand.

You're right, Sue, women did play an important part in the West, too, and we should never forget the ladies —bless 'em.

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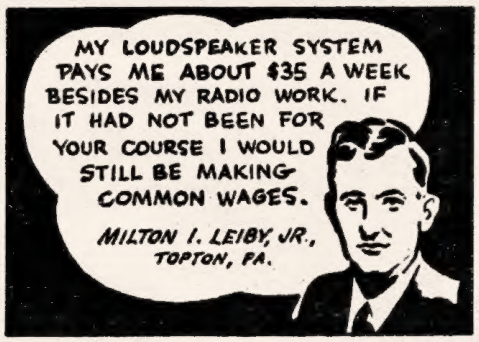
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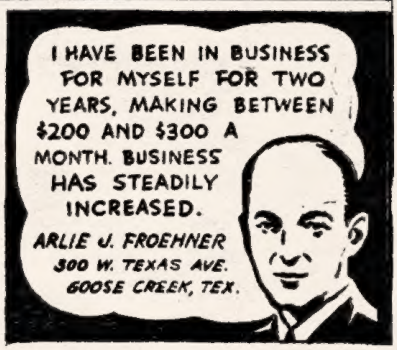
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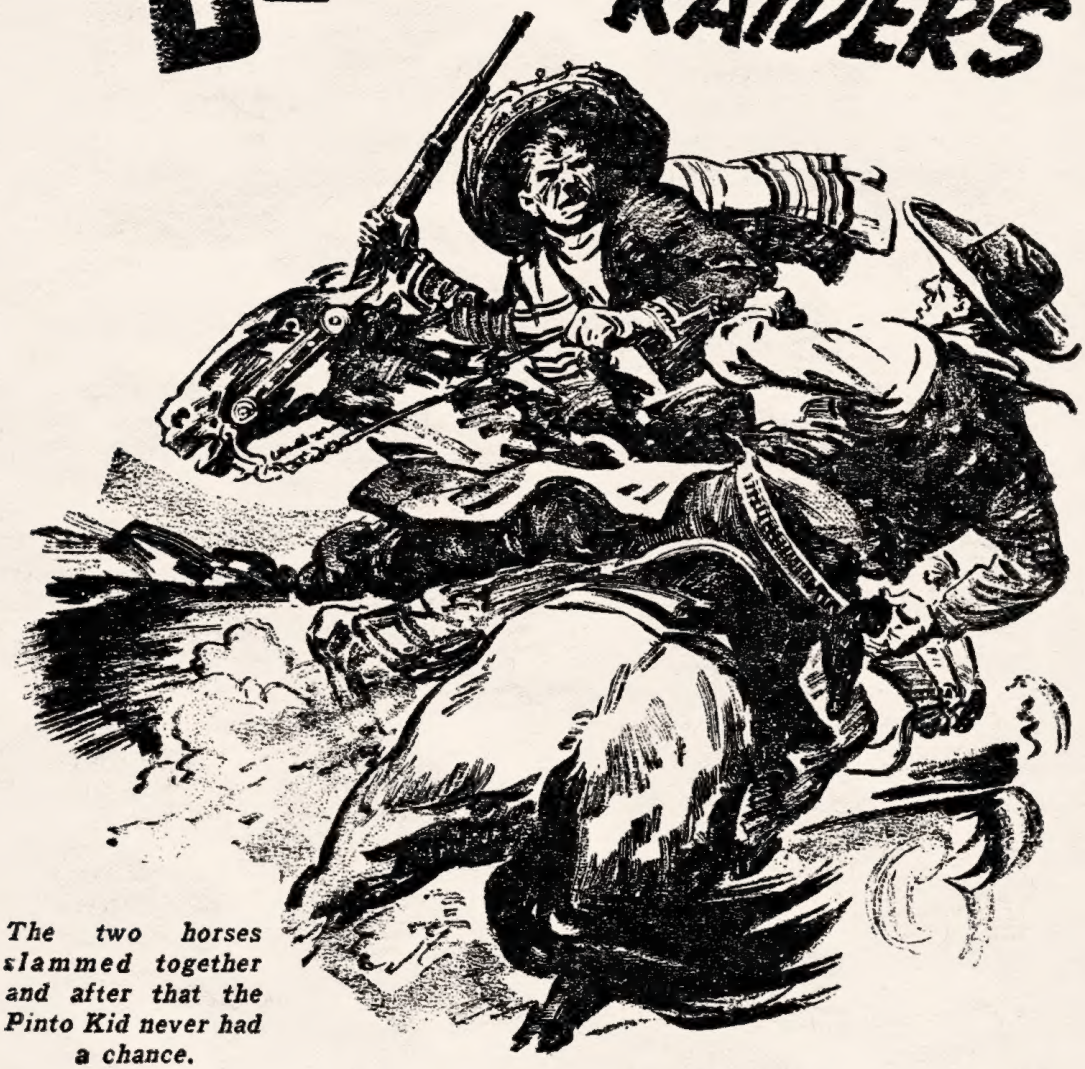
Five horror-filled minutes in Cyclone Pass were enough to prove to the Pinto Kid that hungry loops and dry-gulch lead were providing

BEEF FOR BORDER RAIDERS



The two horses slammed together and after that the Pinto Kid never had a chance.

BY WALKER A. TOMPKINS

RED DEATH had swept through Cyclone Pass that morning. Not the howling blast of the Texas northers which had given the eroded canyon its name; this had been a tornado of ambush bullets and stampeding hoofs.

Dry-gulch evidence was everywhere for the Pinto Kid to see. Evidence that caused the Oklahoman's

mount to shy violently and the rider's face to blanch at the revolting carnage about him. The broken bodies of men lay scattered along the cactus-tufted slopes, sprawled where they had been dumped from the saddle by bullets and then trampled by a tidal wave of berserk cattle. *Zopilote* buzzards winged into the blue while the Pinto Kid was counting eleven carcasses of saddled and bridled horses, likewise bullet riddled and mutilated by stampeding cattle.

"This massacre can't be many hours old," decided the cowboy. "I might have run smack into it—" He shuddered. The eerie cries and beating wings of the scavenger birds were the only sounds breaking the pall of death that had settled over the pass.

The Pinto Kid turned smoke-gray eyes upward to scan the mesquites and tobacco brush which softened the outlines of the rimrock fifty feet above. Here and there the fluted cliffs were broken by draws, and the fresh tracks of steel-shod hoofs showed where the ambushers had ridden down into the canyon after their massacre guns had cleared the way for the stock they had rustled.

"Raiders from the other side of the Rio, probably," muttered the cowpuncher, reining up and hipping over in saddle to survey the scattered corpses. "Hid up on the rim until they had the drovers caught between their cross fire, and then wiped them out. And the cattle these men were hazing through are probably a good ways into Chihuahua by now."

The Pinto Kid's lean, freckle-spattered face was pale and gaunt under his saddle-brown wind burn. Three days of riding over the caprock country of southwestern Texas had put the harsh lines of fatigue there. The dust of a waterless terrain lay thick on the Kid's Stetson, on his work shirt and bullhide chaps. It had converted his strawberry roan into a drab buckskin, and had camouflaged his trailing mule into a neutral shade to match the animal's tarp-bound pack.

Three miles back, a weather-beaten signboard reading "Fifteen miles to Mexitex" had turned the Pinto Kid and his two animals into the twisting corridor of Cyclone Pass; otherwise he would have traveled over the adjacent mesa flats without learning that death had put its blight below the level of the rimrocks.

"These punchers all seem to have been ridin' LK Connected broncs," the Pinto Kid noted, his eyes flitting from carcass to carcass. "Nary a man's got his guns out of leather, so this attack must have been a complete surprise. Prob'ly a—"

THE flat whip crack of a gunshot made him break off with a start. The report came from around the nearby bend of Cyclone Pass, and ricocheted in deafening echo along the cliffs.

The Kid slapped palm to gun butt as he heard the sharp *rataplan* of galloping hoofs on rubble. Then, before he could rein off the trail, a man mounted on a coal-black mustang pounded at full gallop around the canyon turn, coming too fast to avoid collision. The cowboy got a kaleidoscopic glimpse of a scar-webbed Mexican face, a rainbow-hued serape bannering over one shoulder, and a smoking Winchester swinging wide in a brown fist.

The Kid's horse squealed in panic as the hurtling mustang crashed against its brisket and both horses went down, dust clouding the scene

as the dazed riders fought to stay in saddle.

With his Colt barely clear of leather, the Pinto Kid saw the Mexican whipping his rifle stock to shoulder, as his mustang reared to its feet. The Kid was swinging his own gun about as the other man pulled trigger. But the bullet intended for the cowboy's chest was intercepted by the Kid's pony as it lunged to its feet.

The strawberry roan reared momentarily, rocking the Kid backward in saddle, and making a six-gun shot impossible. Then the horse, its spine shattered by steel-jacketed lead, crashed earthward. Instinctively the Kid kicked boots from stirrups to get clear of his collapsing mount. Pain stabbed the cowboy's leg as he was pinioned to the ground under the weight of his mount's carcass.

Twisting his body, the Pinto Kid saw his Mexican assailant spurring up the south slope toward one of the side barrancas. The .45 in the Kid's hand thundered and recoiled, but the shot went wide of its mark as the sombreroed Mexican rocketed up the slope and vanished in a cleft of the scarp.

With a supreme effort the Kid yanked his right leg out from under the roan's shoulder. His pack mule's hackamore struck his face as the panicked animal stampeded in a tight pivot about the slain horse.

Lurching to his feet, the Kid raced clear of the circling mule and slogged his way up the incline of talus rocks. The Mexican, having gained shelter for himself, would undoubtedly double back behind the rimrock chaparral and try to finish his job.

But a different situation was revealed to the Kid as he fought his way through the tangled squits on the mesa floor overlooking Cyclone Pass. Already out of rifle range to the southwest, he saw his Mexican adversary spurring in wild flight over the skyline, to vanish over the first ridge crest.

For a long minute, the cowboy stood staring off across the plain toward the distant cottonwoods and salt cedars marking the Rio Grande. The purple haze of the Mexican wastelands beyond the river seemed to be his attacker's destination.

"I'll be jiggered if I can make sense out of this," the Kid groaned, thrusting his Peacemaker into scabbard and turning back toward the canyon. "Only thing I can do now is see what lies around the bend of the pass. That Mex must have tarried behind to make sure nobody was left alive to tell the why-for of this massacre."

Mounting rage gripped the cowpuncher as he climbed back down into Cyclone Pass, and approached the sprawled carcass of the pony he had raised from a foal. He paused to free his trembling pack mule from its entangling hackamore, and then made his way on around the bend of the canyon.

AS his eyes shuttled from wall to wall of the pass, he spotted a riderless gelding standing in the brush down the canyon. He had not walked a dozen yards before he spotted the missing rider lying among the talus rocks just off the trail. A furrowed trail through the dirt, leading up to the corpse, told the Pinto Kid that the Mexican's victim had been dragged several hundred yards from the stirrup of his bolting horse. A Dragoon .44 was clutched in the dead man's right hand, a thread of smoke still fuming from its bore.

"I only rec'lect hearin' one shot,"

the Kid growled. "Which means this hombre saw the Mex an' they both fired simultaneously."

Between the trail and the north cliffs was a clump of smoke trees, from which led the fresh tracks of the Mexican's horse. From the shelter of that chaparral, the ambusher must have been lying in wait for his victim.

"Might as well try to find out who this jigger was."

Kneeling down, the Pinto Kid rolled the corpse over to stare down into the dust-caked face of a man in his sixties. A rifle bullet had drilled the oldster through the left eye.

From the dead man's hickory shirt, brush-scuffed chaps and blunt-roweled spurs, the Kid judged the ambush victim to have been a drover, or possibly a ranch owner. The band of the dead man's Stetson yielded no initials or other identifying clue.

The pockets contained plug tobacco, matches, loose change, and a cheap watch. The Kid's interest quickened, however, when his exploring fingers located a folded paper in a hip pocket. He unfolded the sheet and saw that it was a letter written on the letterhead of the Lone Star Cattlemen's Association of El Paso.

The Pinto Kid's sun-cracked lips moved soundlessly as he read the message:

MR. LEW KENDALL,
LK Connected Ranch,
Mexitex, Texas.

DEAR MR. KENDALL:

The sheriff of Big Bend County, Hal McGrew, has brought to our attention the fact that frequent depredations of the gang of Mexican raiders led by the outlaw known as El Chirlo has decided you to sell your entire herd of beef stock and quit ranching.

As a paid-up member of the Lone Star Cattlemen's Association, you are entitled to the protection we afford our members. For that reason we are dispatching our ace range detective, Burke Shane, to your section with a view to getting a line on how El Chirlo's raiders operate. Mr. Shane comes to you with the full knowledge that Sheriff McGrew, even with the co-operation of the Chihuahua rurales, has been unable to prevent these Mexican outrages on American ranches.

We suggest, therefore, that you postpone your intended sale of cattle until after our representative has had an opportunity to investigate these raids. If you will advise us by return mail concerning—

A shadow fell across the Pinto Kid's shoulder. The short hairs on the nape of the cowboy's neck stiffened as a harsh voice lashed his ears:

"Reckon you're caught in the act, busky. Stand up slow and easy and turn around—with your arms elevated!"

CHAPTER II

BUSHWHACK EVIDENCE

THE Pinto Kid got to his feet, dropping the letter to Lew Kendall as he raised his arms and wheeled about. Then he stiffened, his smoky eyes staring into the bore of a six-gun that was leveled at his midriff.

A frock-coated man mounted on a sorrel pony was the menace behind the trigger. Too late the Pinto Kid realized that his absorption in the dead man's letter had made him oblivious to the rider's approach. Beyond the gun toter was a second horseman, likewise holding the Kid under a gun drop.

"Close hobble them triggers," the Kid protested, as the frock-coated man dismounted and strode forward to thrust his .45 into the cowboy's stomach. "I can explain this set-up. What call you got to—"

His voice trailed off as he caught sight of a deputy sheriff's badge on his captor's vest. The man reached

out warily with his left hand, jerked the Kid's six-gun from holster, and sniffed the bore.

"Gun's still warm," rasped the lawman. "Lucky we drifted down here to investigate why buzzards were flockin' over the pass, Rojo. Catchin' a rannihan in the act of robbin' the man he bushwhacked makes my trigger finger right itchy."

The Kid's stomach twisted into a granny knot as he caught the implication of the deputy sheriff's tone.

"What right you got to claim *I* killed anybody?" he protested.

"Plenty o' right. In the first place you're trespassin' on Box Diamond range. I'm Forty-rod Davrill, owner o' the Box Diamond. This man with me is Rojo Lake, my segundo. Besides which we both happen to be deputies out o' the Mexitex sheriff's office."

Rojo Lake spurred past his boss to stare down at the sprawled corpse behind the Kid.

"Jumpin' Jehoshaphat!" cried the Box Diamond ramrod in a stunned voice. "He's dry-gulched Cy Borden, boss!"

Before the Pinto Kid could give voice to explanations, Forty-rod Davrill edged in closer, reaming his gun muzzle into hard flesh.

"We got you dead to rights, stranger. But I'll lend a ear to whatever *habla* you got to make concernin' this murder. So far as I know, you're a newcomer to Big Bend County. Who are you, an' what are you doin' here in Cyclone Pass?"

Anger kindled in the cowpuncher as he saw the open hatred in the deputy sheriff's gooseberry eyes.

"Up in the Cimarron stripe they call me the Pinto Kid," he shot back. "I pulled my picket pin and drifted down toward the border country in the hope that I could rent my lass' rope to some spread. The reason I'm in Cyclone Pass is because it seemed to be the main trail leadin' toward Mexitex town."

Davrill jerked a skeptical thumb over his shoulder.

"And you don't know anything about the wipe-out o' the LK Connected trail crew back yonder, I don't suppose?"

IN terse sentences, the Kid recounted his discovery of the carnage in the pass, and his brief ruckus with the unknown Mexican who had high-tailed it for the Rio after ambushing Cy Borden.

"And that's how my part o' this mess stacks up," he finished. "You caught me tryin' to identify this dead jasper. You aim to make anything more out of it?"

Davrill and his foreman exchanged quick glances.

"This is the sixth raid that El Chirlo and his pack of border hoppers has made in the past year," Davrill retorted. "It's common knowledge that El Chirlo's got plenty o' gringo gun slammers on his pay roll. After a wipe-out like this one, he covers his back track with men planted to discourage anybody who try to trail stolen cattle across the Rio into Mexico. The way I size it up, you're one o' El Chirlo's gun hawks, left behind as a lookout."

"And what," demanded the Kid, "do you aim to do about it?"

For answer, Davrill reached in a pocket of his frock coat and drew forth a pair of iron handcuffs. A moment later the deputy had notched the manacles over the Pinto Kid's wrists.

"I'm arrestin' you for Cy Borden's murder, Pinto," Davrill said grimly. "Whether you prove your story is up to a judge an' jury to decide.

Meanwhile, we're taking a pasear over to Mexitex and clap you into the calaboose."

Davrill turned to his foreman and indicated Cy Borden's corpse with a wave of his hand.

"That's Cy's bronc running loose down the pass, Rojo. Fork your horse and rope him so we can pack Cy back to the morgue. The coroner'll have to send a buckboard to pick up those LK Connected hands."

The Pinto Kid stared at his fettered wrists resignedly.

"Just to satisfy my curiosity," he suggested after Rojo Lake had ridden off to catch Borden's loose pony, "who is this dead man? He was packin' a letter addressed to Lew Kendall, the owner of the cattle that got raided this mornin'."

"Cy Borden was foreman of the Kendall spread," Davrill said briefly.

"Another thing," pursued the Cimarron cowboy. "What does this El Chirlo ladrone look like? Or have any of you Texican tin stars ever spotted him close up?"

The deputy sheriff reddened at the Kid's sarcasm.

"El Chirlo does his border hoppin' on dark nights, as a rule. He never leaves anybody alive when he makes a daylight raid like this one."

The Pinto Kid nodded thoughtfully.

"If you know your Mex lingo," he observed, "you'll know that the word 'chirlo' is Spanish for 'scar-faced.' Well, I happen to know that the Mexican who killed Borden had more scars on his mug than a sheep has ticks. Unless I miss my guess, El Chirlo himself did this killin'."

Forty-rod Davrill peered off beyond his prisoner, watching Rojo Lake who was returning with Cy Borden's horse securely lassoed.

"Your theory is interesting, if you can prove it's true, Pinto," grunted the lawman. "You'll have a chance to air your yarn to Sheriff McGrew when we get to Mexitex. But if you can pin this killing on El Chirlo and keep your own neck out of a Texas hang rope, you got a slicker tongue than I give you credit for."

CHAPTER III

"A MATTER OF GUN CALIBER"

MEXITEX was a sprawling cow town built on a hairpin bend of the Rio Grande, with the adobe *jacal* huts of its Mexican counterpart on the Chihuahua side of the river.

Sunset rays were bathing the main stem of the American settlement with bloody light as Deputy Sheriff Forty-rod Davrill and his Box Diamond segundo loped in from the mesa country, each rider trailing a second horse. The death-stiffened remains of Cy Borden were jackknifed over the horse following Rojo Lake, the dead man's wrists and ankles roped together under the horse's belly.

The Pinto Kid was astride his limping pack mule, and far from comfortable since he was sharing the animal with the canvas-bound pack containing his bedroll, grub box and other scanty possessions.

The news of the wholesale slaughter of the LK Connected trail crew out in Cyclone Pass had already reached the cow town and a sullen crowd of gun-hung and sombreroed cowmen was on hand to watch the arrival of the deputy and his prisoner.

The Pinto Kid was conscious of an almost tangible wall of menace fencing him in as his captor drew rein in front of the adobe-walled structure marked "Big Bend County Sheriff's Office and Jail."

A volley of questions greeted Forty-rod Davrill as he swung out of stirrups and drew his six-gun, preparatory to escorting his prisoner into the waiting jail.

"Who's this hombre, Davrill?"

"We heard you trapped one o' El Chirlo's gunnies red-handed, Forty-rod."

"If this is him, I figger a lynch rope will save the taxpayers the cost of givin' the skunk a legal trial!"

The latter proposal was greeted by a crescendo of sullen yells and hoarse cries rising into the dusk as the town's saloons and stores and gambling dives disgorged their occupants to swell the mob gathered about the jail house.

Forty-rod Davrill dug iron-muscled fingers into the Pinto Kid's elbow, and the menace of his six-gun cleared an aisle across the plank sidewalk. The deputy hustled his prisoner into the sheriff's office and without pausing, grabbed a ring of keys hanging on the knob of the jail door. A moment later he had shoved the Pinto Kid into the semi-darkness of the jail's single room.

Steel-barred windows threw a pattern of twilight glow and striping shadows over the Cimarron cowboy as he heard the jail door slam shut behind him. The Mexitex jail house did not have individual cells, and its only furniture consisted of a half-dozen rickety cots ranged about the walls.

"Welcome to Mexitex," chuckled the Pinto Kid, flexing his wrist muscles inside the constricting iron bracelets which Forty-rod Davrill had neglected to remove. "Well, I hear tell Texas justice moves fast an' thorough. Nothin' for me to do but hunker down an' wait for things to happen."

He crossed to a steel-grated window overlooking a side street, and glanced out at the silhouetted outlines of false-fronted saloons and livery stables which shut out a view of the Chihuahua hills across the muddy Rio. From the direction of the main street, he could hear Forty-rod Davrill's voice exhorting the swelling mob to break up and await the arrival of the sheriff.

A moment later, the Pinto Kid got a view of the throng working its way diagonally up the street, as Rojo Lake headed for an undertaker's establishment with Cy Borden's corpse.

The Kid fished makings out of his shirt pocket and was licking a quirly when the bolt on the door rattled and a towering man in ant-hill-crowned Stetson and cactus-scarred chaps entered the jail, locking the door behind him.

"I'M Hal McGrew, the sheriff of this burg," the newcomer announced, crossing the plank floor with a faint tinkle of spur rowels. "The town seems to think my deputy dabbed his loop on one of El Chirlo's trigger men. I thought mebbe we could talk things over, son. I still got an open mind concernin' you."

The Pinto Kid grinned, instantly warming to the rawboned old Texan. Hal McGrew was obviously a sheriff of the old school, who enforced law and order in an uncurried outpost of Texas rangeland by the sheer strength of gun skill and guts. In the eerie half light of the jail room, the Pinto Kid saw a grin lurking behind the lawman's waterfall mustache.

"Thanks, sheriff," answered the Pinto Kid, as McGrew seated himself on the cot. "But I ain't worryin' about provin' my innocence. A matter o' gun calibers will do that for me."

The Kid risked everything on one savage punch, but even as the deputy went down he clawed for his gun!

McGrew looked startled. "What say?"

"A matter of gun calibers. When your deputy caught me red-handed, as he claims, I was packin' a .45 hogleg. Your coroner is going to dig a steel-jacketed .30-30 slug out of Borden's noggin. So draw your own conclusions, sheriff."

The Mexitex lawdog eyed his prisoner dubiously.

"The prosecutin' attorney may ask you to prove you didn't plug Borden with a .30-30 yourself, son."

The Oklahoman shrugged, extracting a match from his pocket.

"I own a Winchester, yes. But it's in my saddle boot, with twelve hundred pounds of very dead pony layin' on it, out in Cyclone Pass. Or did Davrill tell you about the Mexican who plugged my horse?"

"Yes," the sheriff admitted. "But Davrill says you acted all-fired suspicious about identifying yourself. Driftin' cowhands, like you claim to be, are always under suspicion when they're tangled up with a range murder."

The Kid laughed softly, his face etched with harsh shadows as he thumbnailed flame from the tip of his match and lighted the brown-paper cigarette.

"I told Davrill folks call me the Pinto Kid."

For the first time, McGrew's eyes showed a glint of suspicion. "What's your real name? That sounds like an alias."

"I don't know my real name. My parents were scalped by Cherokees when I was a button. I've knocked around for I reckon about twenty-five years as a nameless orphan. My red hair an' freckles gave me my nickname. It's been good enough for me."

The sheriff leaned forward, a handcuff key glinting between thumb and forefinger. The Pinto Kid wriggled his fingers in relief as McGrew unlocked the irons and pocketed them.

"I'm heading out to Cyclone Pass with the coroner and his dead wagon to pick up those Kendall riders," the sheriff said, getting to his feet. "Before I left town, I wanted to have a look-see at the prisoner Davrill brought in."

"Any idea when my case'll come to trial, sheriff?"

McGrew's face was grim in the sunset glow which shafted in through the barred window behind the Pinto Kid.

"Our court works *pronto prontico* here in Mexitex," McGrew answered. "We'll swear in a jury and air your story in a courtroom by tomorrow afternoon, I reckon. In the meantime, is there any way you can identify yourself as an honest citizen, Pinto? Any proof you can supply the judge that you aren't one of El Chirlo's trigger men?"

The ruby glow of the Kid's cigarette revealed an enigmatical grin flickering over the prisoner's lips.

"When the time comes, I reckon I can telegraph for help. Ranch bosses I've worked for an' such. Meanwhile, what guarantee have I got that a lynch mob won't break into this jail while you're takin' your pasear over to Cyclone Pass. I don't hone to be swinging under a cottonwood when you get back to town."

Hal McGrew shifted the weight of his double Colts nervously.

"I've given some thought to that —which is why I'm not taking a posse out there to the scene of that massacre," the Texan answered. "I'm instructing Forty-rod Davrill to throw a guard around this jail tonight, in case Mexitex gets ugly."

McGrew headed for the door.

From the threshold of his office, he called back:

"Your pack mule's bedded down in the county stable, Pinto. And the chink in the restaurant across the street is fixin' up some grub for you."

The Kid's pulse raced as he caught sight of his canvas-bound pack saddle lying on the floor of the lantern-lighted office.

"I see you've brung in my belongings, sheriff," he remarked with elaborate casualness. "I got a banjo in my pack. Long as I'm goin' to be roosting here overnight, maybe you'll let me soothe my weary and sleepless hours with some so-called music."

McGrew hesitated and then, scowling slightly, entered his office. After a brief interval he stepped back into the jail, pausing to hook a kerosene lantern on a wall peg.

He handed his prisoner a battered banjo, scuffed and scarred from years of use around chuck wagons and campfires.

"Seein' as how you're the only prisoner I got, I reckon you won't be torturing nobody's ears but your own," the sheriff said dryly.

The Pinto Kid grinned enigmatically as he saw the door close.

CHAPTER IV

LYNCH FEVER

A LOPSIDED moon cruised out of a fleecy cloud nest in the Texas heavens as the midnight hour passed. Sheriff McGrew and the county coroner still had not returned with their wagon load of dead from the ambuscade in Cyclone Pass.

The Pinto Kid, strumming plaintive range tunes on his rickety banjo, was fully aware of the sinister tension which the passing hours were building up in Mexitex.

He knew that the main stem outside was ominously deserted. That meant that men were gathered at bars and around gambling tables in the various saloons. And it was not difficult for the Kid to surmise the topic of their discussions. The bloody shambles out in Cyclone Pass had put a blight over the range country, had kindled the flames of hate and vengeance in the hearts of the Mexitex men, many of whom had bucked the blazing guns of El Chirlo's raiders from across the Rio.

Through the barred windows of the jail structure, the Pinto Kid could hear the measured tread of spurred boots as armed guards patrolled the jail-house yard. From out front snatches of low-voiced conversations could be made out as visitors passed in and out of McGrew's office where big Forty-rod Davrill stood guard over the jail door with a loaded shotgun across his knees.

Trouble was brewing in Mexitex tonight. And the Pinto Kid knew that he would be its focal point when the storm broke. During the brief moment he had faced the street throng upon his arrival in town, the Kid had sensed the lynch fever which was being lashed to the breaking point wherever men were discussing the Cyclone Pass massacre.

The unexpected sound of a woman's voice out in the front office caused the Pinto Kid to set his banjo aside on the cot and tiptoe to the connecting doorway.

"Of course I know there's lynch talk in town tonight, honey!" came Forty-rod's voice through the panels. "Why do you think I'm roosting here with a scatter gun, if I ain't expecting trouble?"

The feminine voice which an-

swered the deputy sherif was taut with strain:

"I've only been in town twenty minutes, Forty-rod, and already I've heard from three different persons that you think this cowboy is guilty of Cy's murder."

"I ain't denyin' it. Rojo Lake and me as good as seen this Pinto Kid do the shootin'."

"That isn't the point, Forty-rod. Rojo and your Box Diamond hands are up at the Green Skull Saloon this minute, cooking up a scheme to break into this jail and string up the prisoner."

The Pinto Kid's straining eardrums caught the deputy sheriff's harsh laughter.

"My waddies aren't alone in that feelin', Ella. Not by a dang sight. Mexitex is gettin' tired of El Chirlo's raids."

"But if a lynch mob does come," the girl persisted, "are you going to defend McGrew's prisoner, in case the sheriff isn't back yet?"

There was a moment's silence on the other side of the door. Then Davrill answered in a surly voice:

"I don't aim to be gunned down by some rowdy, if that's what you mean. And now, I reckon you better be goin', Ella. If anything does bust loose, it'll be here. And I don't want you underfoot."

STOOPING, the Pinto Kid applied an eye to the keyhole. Framed against the night outside the sheriff's office window, he saw a girl in her early twenties defiantly standing her ground as Forty-rod Davrill gripped her shoulders and attempted to turn her toward the street doorway.

She wore a biscuit-colored Stetson over her chestnut curls, a buckskin blouse decorated with Indian beadwork, whipcord breeches and light Mexican spurs. Girdling her slim waist was a cartridge belt sagging under the weight of an ivory-stocked .32.

"I came over here to see the prisoner, Forty-rod!" flared the girl jerking her shoulders from the deputy's grasp. "Cy Borden was my best friend. If this Pinto Kid killed him, I want to make sure of it."

"Let you in there to see a desperate character like—"

"I've got a gun. I can take care of myself."

The Pinto Kid leaped back from the keyhole as he heard Davrill's unwilling assent. He was seated on his cot, strumming soft chords on his banjo, when Davrill unlocked the office door to admit the girl.

"I want to talk to this man in private, Forty-rod!" she said, as Davrill started to accompany her across the jail room. "You'll have your hands full keeping hoodlums from coming in the front door."

The deputy hesitated, glared balefully at the banjo player on the jail cot, and then went back into the sheriff's office.

"*Buenas noches,* miss," drawled the Pinto Kid, getting to his feet as the girl crossed the room with a brisk step and halted before him, her hazel eyes searching his lean face. "I wasn't exactly expectin' visitors—leastwise, not lady visitors."

The girl did not appear to notice his gesture for her to be seated on the cot.

"You didn't kill Cy Borden," was her startling declaration. "If you'd told the sheriff who you are, you wouldn't be in danger now. And you are in danger—desperately so. The whole town is crying for the blood of the Pinto Kid. And yet you—"

The Oklahoman laughed harshly. "I know. I overheard you telling Davrill that Mexitex is bent on stringing me up. But why did you come to—"

He broke off as the girl seized his arm.

"You're Burke Shane! Why didn't you tell Davrill and Rojo Lake you were a Cattle Association man when they arrested you?"

The Pinto Kid's jaw sagged open in astonishment.

"What's that again, miss?"

"You're Burke Shane," she repeated. "You must be. Cy Borden sent word to El Paso that he'd meet you out in the pass this afternoon and bring you to the home ranch. He was riding out to meet you when he was killed."

The Pinto Kid laid down his banjo and regarded the girl with new interest.

"What makes you think *I'm* Shane?"

She made an impatient gesture.

"Because I saw the first letter your chief sent me from El Paso. He said Burke Shane was a red-headed hellion with more freckles than spots on a brindle cow. Why the secrecy when—"

A sudden burst of gunfire on the street in front of the jail made them both start violently. Dust showered down from the rafters as the salvo of lead riddled the shingles. Close on the heels of the gun thunder came a roar of voices as the inflamed throng from the town saloons advanced on the sheriff's office.

THEY'VE come!" the girl cried frantically. "Your life won't be worth a plugged peso, Shane. And Forty-rod thinks you're guilty. He'll make a bluff at stalling off the mob, and then step aside and—"

The Pinto Kid glanced over his shoulder at the office door, then turned to face the girl, his face deadly earnest in the lantern light.

"All right—I'm Shane!" he said bleakly. "I've got my own reasons for wanting to play my hand under cover, but I'm telling you because I know you're fixin' to make some fool play in my behalf. I—"

Another ear-jarring burst of shots drowned out his voice.

"I've got to talk fast!" he drove on, his lips close to the girl's ear. "I've got an ace in the hole that will have me out of this rat trap of a jail inside of a minute. But you've got to give me your word not to tell Davrill or anybody else who I—"

The sheriff's door burst open and Forty-rod Davrill came running into the jail room to seize the girl's arm.

"They're surroundin' the jail!" the deputy yelled. "Nothin' this side of hell will hold 'em back when they start gunning at my guards. Come on!"

With a jerk that nearly pulled the girl's arm out of its socket, Davrill dragged the struggling visitor into the outer office. She flung a glance over her shoulder and saw the Pinto Kid put a finger to his lips in a swift gesture for silence. Then Davrill had crashed the door shut and shot the bolts home.

For the space of a dozen heartbeats, the Pinto Kid stood motionless beside his cot. Then, racing across the room, he raised the chimney of the wall lantern and blew out the light.

Outside, the night was a bedlam of yells and exploding guns. Going to the side-street window of the jail, the Kid glimpsed a turbulent sea of sombreroed heads over the top of the jail-yard fence.

The light of blazing torches shed a fantastic glow over the street outside, as a tidal wave of murder-

thirsty humanity surged over the plank sidewalk to assault the front wall of the sheriff's office with gun butts and fists.

"I wonder," mused the Pinto Kid as he headed back toward his cot and groped in the darkness for his banjo, "who in tarnation that girl is—"

CHAPTER V

DYNAMITE MUSIC

THE roar of the lynch mob lulled off as the strident voice of a shotgun guard at the front door of the jail house threatened to riddle the weltering citizenry with buckshot.

"Hal McGrew left us with orders to defend the prisoner come hell or high water—"

A chorus of disdainful jeers drowned out the lone voice of the jail guard and reached the straining eardrums of the Pinto Kid as he carried his banjo to the back window of the jail where a shaft of moonlight streamed through the bars.

"Forty-rod, call your men off before we salivate the whole passel of ye!" boomed a stentorian voice from the mob. "You know yourself that skunk you're guardin' is one o' El Chirlo's men. What you got to lose?" Whatever reply the deputy made was lost in the pandemonium in front of the jail.

With unhurried fingers the Pinto Kid broke the strings from his banjo and then proceeded to smash a fist through the white calfskin drumhead of the instrument.

"The old ace in the hole," chuckled the redhead as he tore the broken calfskin from the circular box of the banjo. "The chief figured my idea was loco, but the chief never did exercise his imagination—"

The moonlight which fell through the iron-barred windows revealed an amazing thing.

Taped to the thin mahogany interior of the banjo was a cylindrical object. Wrapped in pink paper, it resembled a skyrocket. From one end of the cylinder protruded a short length of fuse, to which was attached an ordinary percussion cap such as miners use to detonate a blast in bedrock.

With the roar of the lynch mob jarring his ears, the Pinto Kid tore the stick of dynamite free from its loops of tape and removed his "ace in the hole" from inside the banjo's sound box.

A moment later he was placing the stick of explosive into a cavity where loose mortar had fallen from the space between the bottom sill of the window and the adjacent course of adobe bricks. A few minutes' work with a spur rowel while he was waiting for the Chinese restaurant man to bring him his supper earlier that evening, had enabled the Pinto Kid to prepare the cavity against possible emergency.

When only the wormlike fuse was visible below the sill, the Kid took a match from the snakeskin band of his Stetson, thumbnailed it into flame, and applied the match to the frayed end of the fuse.

In a moment it was sputtering like a Fourth of July firecracker. The Pinto Kid raced to the opposite side of the jail. With a free hand he dragged a mattress from the nearest cot.

Pulling it swiftly over his body as a protection against flying bits of adobe, he threw himself belly down on the floor planks, his face to the wall.

And then it seemed as if a thunderbolt had struck the thick-walled jail building. A blinding flash of pink light illuminated the room to the accompaniment of a thunderous

blast of sound which seemed to rock the earth to its core.

Concussion plastered the cot mattress against the Pinto Kid's body with a force that drove the air from his lungs. Flying wood and big chunks of adobe hammered the rough wall above him.

DAZEDLY, the Pinto Kid lurched to his feet as stifling billows of dynamite smoke and powdered adobe dust smote his nostrils. The air was thick with settling debris.

Moonlight, coming through a gaping hole in the east side of the jail building, flooded the smoke-filled room. Where a heavily barred rectangle of window had once afforded the only break in the thick wall, there was now a ragged fissure large enough for a man on horseback to ride through.

Clamping fingers to his nose to keep out the choking fumes of the explosive, the Pinto Kid lurched forward through opaque, eddying coils of smoke and dust, clambering through knee-deep debris as he reached the ruined wall.

The force of the blast had been diverted inward and upward, so that shingles had been ripped bodily from rafters overhead. The moonlight pouring into the wrecked building guided the cowboy as he climbed through the shattered wall and landed on the hard ground outside.

Moving like a phantom through the dust and smoke which was roiling for a hundred feet from the blasted wall of the jail, the Pinto Kid leaped to get a grip on the top of the board fence, scrambled up and over, and jumped down into the alley alongside the towering wall of a livery stable.

And then, in the act of picking himself up, he found himself staring into the twin bores of a buckshot gun, held by one of the deputy sheriffs, who was patrolling the alley alongside the jail.

For several paralyzed seconds, the guard stared slack-jawed at the apparition which had vaulted the fence, too dazed to comprehend the identity of the man who had landed at his very feet. But the Pinto Kid, stunned and shaken as he was, knew that the guard's first reflex would cause him to jerk both triggers and loose a deadly charge of buckshot from the weapon he clutched in palsied hands.

Bounding upright like a released spring, the Kid knocked the guard's scatter gun to one side, following it up with a dynamite-packed right which landed flush on the guard's jaw.

Staggered by the terrific punch, the man sprawled in the dust of the alley. His eyes glazed, he was only dimly aware that his attacker had pounced forward and was tugging his six-gun from its holster.

Earing back the knurled hammer of the .45 he had appropriated, the Pinto Kid crouched low and headed into the darkness of the alley. Then he skidded to a halt as he saw that the sheer adobe wall of a stable shed formed a dead end. His only alternative, he realized with alarm, was to head in the opposite direction, which would take him directly to the main street.

Gun in readiness, the Kid gained the junction of the narrow alley and the main street in time to catch the first reaction of the dazed lynch mob before the jail.

Forty-rod Davrill was framed in the open door of the sheriff's office, frozen in the posture he had taken at the moment of the terrific detonation in the rear of the building. The crowd had fallen back from the jail steps, momentarily stunned by

the earth-shaking explosion.

"Jehoshaphat!" came a yell from a shotgun guard standing beside the jail door with his back to the wall. "Somebody's blew up the calaboose while we been augerin' out front here—"

A grin relaxed the Pinto Kid's features as he saw Davrill vanish inside McGrew's office, followed by a forward rush of men eager to see the result of the unexpected blast.

The deputy sheriff's disappearance was a signal for the lynch mob to split up, as men headed for the back of the jail building, running down opposite sides of the building.

SPRINTING figures buffeted the Pinto Kid as he clambered up on the wooden-awninged porch of the livery barn, men who paid no attention to the cowboy who had emerged from the alley as they streamed into the narrow passage to reach the smoking ruin of the jail house.

Unnoticed in the pandemonium, the Kid moved unhurriedly across the main street, his eyes fixed on a row of cow ponies hitched to a cottonwood rack in front of a hotel opposite the jail.

Sizing up the line of saddle horses, the man from the Cimarron calmly selected a fine stallion on whose rump was the Box Diamond brand of Forty-rod Davrill's outfit. As he slipped under the hitch rail and started untying the animal, men came flooding back out of the front door of the jail building onto the Mexitex street.

"Either that blast tore the Pinto Kid into hash meat, or he made his getaway, men!" yelled a bareheaded hombre in a bartender's apron as he led the exodus from the jail. "There ain't hide nor hair o' that hombre inside—"

Hoarse yells from the alley beside the livery barn told the Pinto Kid that the mob had discovered the shotgun guard, by now recovering from the effect of the blow he had suffered.

Swinging into saddle, the Pinto Kid curvetted the big Box Diamond stallion out from the row of hitched cow ponies. He was staking his chance at making a getaway on the hope that few men would recognize him as the erstwhile guest of the Big Bend County jail.

And then, from the doorway of the jail, Forty-rod Davrill's voice rang out to bring a chill to the Kid's veins:

"There he goes! The dang jail buster's choosin' a hoss in front o' the Drover's Hotel—"

Frantically, the Pinto Kid raked the stallion's flanks with steel. The horse hurtled into a gallop from a standing start, as the shotgun in Davrill's hands roared. A double charge of buckshot screamed past the Kid as he threw himself low over the pommel and raked his mount desperately.

Bullets whined like hornets in flight past the Pinto Kid's head, and geysers of dust spouted from the street about the stallion's flying hoofs as the horse rounded a curve in the main street and headed out toward the Rio Grande. Looming ahead was the low bridge which connected the Texas part of town with the Chihuahua settlement across the river.

Desperation clawed at the Pinto Kid as the stallion rocketed between deserted buildings to approach the international bridge. Escape over the Rio Grande would be impossible by way of the bridge. Already, the Kid caught sight of armed customs and immigration guards as they emerged from the Federal shacks on

the river bank. Border officials would bar his flight across the bridge with alert rifles, even though they might not be aware of the reason for his hurry.

REINING into a side street which paralleled the Rio Grande, the Pinto Kid twisted in saddle in time to see horsemen veering around the curve in the main stem, moonlight glinting on drawn gun metal. Every man who could reach a horse was already hammering in pursuit.

And then the Kid's stallion, swerving abruptly to avoid colliding with a freight wagon which blocked the street, tangled hoofs with a mongrel cur which had emerged from a river-bank shanty.

For a horrified instant, the Pinto Kid thought the stallion was going into a somersault. Instinctively the cowboy kicked boots from stirrups, and then he was catapulting through space as the stallion went down in full gallop.

The Pinto Kid landed on hands and knees in fetlock-deep dust. Panting heavily, he regained his feet and headed toward the Rio Grande an instant before the side street came alive with pursuing horsemen.

It would be fatal, he knew, to hide among the crude shacks which lined the Rio's cut banks; the area would be surrounded by vigilant searchers the moment his empty-saddled mount was discovered.

Running at top speed, the Kid found his way blocked by the sliding, muddy current of the Rio Grande. Without checking his headlong rush, the cowpuncher skidded down the cactus-dotted shale bank and plunged hip-deep into the river. Then bottom fell away under his slogging boots, and he started swimming as the swift current seized him and whirled his body into midstream.

Soon an intervening bend of the Rio Grande shut the lights of Mexitex town from view, and the howls of men questing for the Pinto Kid's blood grew dimmer.

An uprooted cottonwood stump, floating sluggishly on the freshet-swollen river, offered haven as the Kid struggled desperately to overcome the dead weight of chaps and cow boots. A moment later he had circled his arms about the floating tree trunk and prepared to ride the river flood to a point where he could reach the bank and safety.

CHAPTER VI

OWNER OF THE LK CONNECTED

DAWN found the Pinto Kid clambering into a natural cavern which the sluicing waters of the Rio Grande had gouged into the base of a bluff on the American side of the river. The Oklahoman figured that he had floated at least five miles downstream from Mexitex.

"Even if they figger that I dived into the Rio, and decide to patrol both banks," he reasoned, "there won't be any tracks to show that I come ashore here. And while I'm hiding out I can catch some shut-eye."

He threw himself, numb with cold and exhausted from the rigors of his getaway, on a shelf of dry sand which was out of sight of the mouth of the cavern. In less than five minutes he was sleeping heavily.

When he next opened his eyes, indirect daylight had filtered into the denlike passage where he had taken refuge.

He got to his knees, cramped and stiff, to find that his clothing was almost dry. The rhythmic burble of the Rio Grande through the tan-

Death hovered close, ready to strike if Forty-rod Davrill made a play in the face of that leveled six-gun.

gled willow growth and driftwood jam was the only sound he heard.

Crawling back outside for a look-see up and down the river, the Kid was astonished to see that the sun was halfway down the afternoon sky. He had slept some twelve hours and the rest had restored his jaded strength, but hunger gnawed his vitals like a knife blade inside his stomach.

From the outjutting Rio sand bar against which his cottonwood stump had lodged amid other sun-bleached debris, the Pinto Kid had an unbroken view for a mile up the Rio Grande in the direction of Mexitex town.

His probing gaze saw no sign of life on either the Texas or Mexican sides of the river. Steep brown banks were reflected in the muddy stream, revealing no beach where a posse might search for traces of a fugitive.

His mind at ease, the Pinto Kid turned his attention to the cleaning of the six-gun he had obtained from the Mexitex jail guard at the outset of his flight. He removed the cylinder, blew moisture from the bore, and carefully wiped the Colt mechanism and the five cartridges which the gun had contained.

Before reloading, the Kid removed a jackknife from his Levis and extricated a slug from its cartridge, to make sure that the prolonged immersion of the night before had not damaged the gunpowder.

"As dry as my belly is empty," he grinned. "And it looks like the only chance I'll have to put on the nose bag today is to pot a jack rabbit."

THE Kid tugged off his Coffeyville boots to let the hot sun dry them out inside. Then, shielded from view by the willow and scrub cottonwood which masked the entrance of the undercut cavern, he sat down to figure out his next move.

His horse, rifle and canteen had been left at the scene of El Chirlo's raid in Cyclone Pass; no doubt the sheriff, on his trip out to the canyon the night before, had loaded his possessions aboard the coroner's wagon.

The pack which had contained all his other possessions was beyond recovery, inside the jail house. On the face of it, his outlook was a bleak one. He had no doubt but that the rangeland was being combed by possemen. By now a reward would probably have been posted for his capture, a reward preferably cashable on his dead body.

"Unless that girl named Ella spreads the word that I'm really a cattle detective named Burke Shane," mused the Kid. "If she gets spooky and tells that to the sheriff, maybe I wouldn't have to hole up like a polecat."

The ravages of hunger finally drove him to put on his boots—a difficult task, for the night's swim had caused the kangaroo leather to shrink appreciably—and make his way out of the cottonwood bosque.

The Rio Grande's channel at that point was a hundred yards wide, the Chihuahua side presenting an unscalable front. The bluff which overtowered the Pinto Kid's hiding place on the north bank, however, presented a roof-steep slope with plenty of rocks and brush to afford a hand hold for climbing.

Foot by foot, the Pinto Kid worked his way up the slope. The westering sun was in his eyes as he scrambled over the rim and scanned the surrounding terrain cautiously.

To the northwest, he recognized the sprawl of tar-paper-roofed shacks marking the Mexitex settlement. His view to the northeast was cut

off by the sage-tufted backbone of a low ridge.

He was in the act of heading for the crest of the hogback when a sombreroed rider topped the rise. The newcomer's horse shied as it caught sight of the bedraggled cowpuncher below.

There was no time for the Pinto Kid to duck back out of sight; the wind had prevented any warning sound of hoofbeats from reaching his ears until the horse was practically upon him.

The Kid's bronzed hand stabbed to holster, and then he relaxed as the rider swept up an arm in greeting and called:

"Burke Shane! Of all places for you to bob up—"

The Pinto Kid shoved back his Stetson and scratched his shock of brick-colored hair, as he recognized the girl who had visited him in the jail.

"Miss Ella!" he drawled as she spurred down the slope and dismounted, thrusting out a hand to clasp his. "This comes under the heading of a happy coincidence, that you'd be ridin' past this particular spot."

The girl's eyes were shining and suspiciously moist as they met his gaze.

"I was just heading for Mexitex to see if there was any news about you," she explained. "It isn't a coincidence that I'm here, seeing that my home ranch is just over the ridge. But tell me—what miracle finds you alive?"

The cowboy explained briefly his getaway down the Rio Grande.

"That explosion?" he answered her eager question. "Well, Miss Ella, in my business I've always figured the time might come when I'd need an ace in the hole. Years ago, I conceived the idea of packing around a stick of dynamite, inside the old banjo I always carry. Once before I saved my life with it when a rustler crew cornered me in a saloon in Sacatone. Only in that case, I let 'em know the firecracker I took out of my banjo was big enough to blow us all to eternity if they started shootin'."

The girl shuddered involuntarily.

"I . . . I was standing in that crowd last night, debating whether to tell them who you were," she said in a shaken voice. "And when I heard that blast, I thought somebody had sneaked up behind and blown up the jail. Then I saw you making your getaway—"

She broke off as she suddenly noticed the Kid's haggard features.

"Why, you must be famished," she said. "Come on. My horse can carry double. We'll ride over to my place. It's just beyond the hill. In fact, it's the ranch you came to help out, Mr. Shane. The LK Connected."

The girl swung into the stirrups and waited for him to set foot to stirrup and swing behind the cantle, but the Pinto Kid stood there as though frozen.

"You . . . you own the LK Connected spread?" he gasped at last. "But I thought an hombre named Lew Kendall— You know, all this time you've kept me in the dark about what *your* name is, Miss Ella."

The girl's eyes danced as she looked down at him.

"I guess I've been very rude, in all the excitement of hearing about your escape last night. My name is Lew Kendall, Mr. Shane. I'm the person your Cattle Association has been corresponding with. They've got the ranch registered in a man's name."

THE Kid mounted behind her, aware of the soft brush of her curls across his cheek as the girl reined about and spurred into a lope.

"But I thought— Last night Davrill called you Ella—"

Her laugh wafted back to him above the drumming of hoofs.

"My name's Lewella. Dad wanted a boy, poor dear. When I came along he couldn't call me Lewis, Junior, so he called me Lewella. I've carried on the ranch since he died but there's not much left of it after yesterday. I . . . I lost my crew and . . . and my entire beef herd in that raid."

The two rode in silence as they topped the hogback and headed for a neat whitewashed ranchhouse situated in a bend of the Rio Grande. Barns, corrals, bunkhouse and blacksmith shop were in the background; but the rolling Texas cattle range in the distance was significantly empty of stock.

Lewella Kendall reined up at the front gate of the whitewashed picket fence surrounding the LK Connected ranchhouse. Tragic memories seemed to cloud the girl's eyes as they dismounted and the Pinto Kid tied the reins to a steel ring in the gatepost.

A few minutes later, as the Pinto Kid was devouring the meal which Lewella prepared for him in the ranchhouse kitchen, he learned for the first time the events leading up to the massacre in Cyclone Pass.

Because the LK Connected range bordered the Rio Grande, the Kendall beef herds had been raided with increasing frequency by the Mexican rustlers from the Chihuahua badlands.

"Dad was one of El Chirlo's first victims," the girl told the cowboy. "That was five years ago. Since then, I've tried to carry on, with the help of old Cyrus Borden. But it's been increasingly difficult to hire cowhands. They take their lives in their hands just signing up with the LK Connected."

The Pinto Kid nodded thoughtfully, staring out through the kitchen window at the sage flats rolling away to meet the eastern horizon.

"Of course, my spread isn't the only one that's been raided by El Chirlo," Lewella continued. "My neighbor, Forty-rod Davrill, has lost hundreds of head of cattle, and as many cowpunchers as I have. But his is a big outfit and he can afford to buy fresh feeder stock from Montana or the Panhandle."

Absorbed in his thoughts, the Pinto Kid stirred and drank his coffee mechanically. Finally he looked up and his glance met that of the comely young boss of the LK Connected spread.

"Miss Kendall," he said, "I got a pretty fair idea of how things have panned out. You finally decided to quit ranching. That's when the Cattlemen's Association heard about your trouble and decided to help out. But you sold your beef anyway."

LEWELLA KENDALL flushed before his keen gaze.

"You think I'm a quitter," she said a little defiantly. "But wouldn't you have done as I did? I sold my beef herd to a syndicate over in the Pecos country. Forty-rod Davrill offered me a fair price for this ranch, since it borders his own. What cowboys I had left agreed to take the herd over to the Pecos range. And . . . and you know what happened. They didn't get any farther than—"

"Than Cyclone Pass. And now El Chirlo's hazed your beef critters into Mexico."

The Pinto Kid shoved his dishes to one side of the table and reached into his hip pocket. Out of the pocket he drew a tightly folded roll of cowskin which had been tied up, hair side in, with rawhide thongs.

"Miss Kendall," he said gravely, "I've got something here I want you to look at. This chunk of steer hide is one reason why I'm down here, investigatin' this El Chirlo rustlin' business. But before I say anything more, there's something I've got to tell you before you and me can work together on this case. I want you to promise to keep secret what I'm going to say. Then—"

He paused in the act of untying his roll of cowhide as a sharp knock sounded on the side door of the ranchhouse.

Lewella Kendall's eyes widened with alarm.

"It may be someone looking for you," she whispered tensely. "Somebody may have seen us come here together. But leave it to me—"

The Pinto Kid got to his feet, thumb hooked in cartridge belt as the girl crossed the room and swung the door open.

Standing on the kitchen porch was a tall man in dust-covered sombrero and Levis, on whose calfhide vest glittered the star-shaped badge.

Then the Pinto Kid stiffened, as the door opened wider to reveal Forty-rod Davrill standing beside the lawman.

"Mornin', Ella," greeted the deputy sheriff. "I brought out the range detective you and Cy Borden were expecting yesterday. Shake hands with Burke Shane. Shane, this is Lewella Kendall—the girl I aim to make my wife."

CHAPTER VII

THE IMPOSTOR

BURKE SHANE bowed courteously, removing his Stetson to reveal a shock of flaming red hair which matched the hue of his polka-dot freckles.

"But— You can't be! That is—" Lewella bit her lips as she

stared incredulously at the stranger's badge. Engraved on the furbished metal were the words "Special Detective, Lone Star Cattlemen's Association, El Paso, Texas."

"I beg your pardon, Miss Kendall," apologized Shane, misinterpreting the shock which flooded the girl's eyes. "I hope my belated arrival hasn't revived memories of yesterday's tragedy. If I had not been delayed, your foreman might be alive today."

Then it was that Forty-rod Davrill, glancing past Lewella's shoulder, caught sight of the chap-clad cowpuncher inside the kitchen.

A startled oath blew from the deputy's lips as he whipped back his frock coat to slap palm to a .45 butt, at the same time pushing

the girl aside and striding over the threshold.

"Hold it, Davrill!" warned the Pinto Kid. "You're covered!"

The deputy froze with six-gun half drawn from holster, as he saw the Kid's right hand come up from below the level of the table. A cocked six-gun was in the cowboy's hand, its barrel covering both Davrill and the astonished range detective on the porch outside.

Speaking through lips drawn thin over gritting teeth, the Pinto Kid raised his voice to throw an order at Burke Shane:

"You, Shane—get your arms up. Let go that hogleg and elevate, Davrill. Miss Kendall, you and Shane come inside and line up along the wall."

Burke Shane stared dumfoundedly at Lewella Kendall, unable to fathom the sudden turn of events. Then he raised his arms jerkily, as he saw the girl turn and step past Forty-rod Davrill to enter the kitchen.

Rage mottled Davrill's face but he let his Colt slide back into holster and lifted his arms hat-brim high. The eyes of the trio were riveted to the muzzle of the Pinto Kid's six-gun, as they nervously lined themselves up along the kitchen wall.

"What is this?" protested Shane, his voice a mixture of amusement and alarm. "I don't savvy this set-up. Who is this man, Miss Kendall?"

Davrill answered the question, his eyes flashing murderously at the Kid.

"It's the Pinto Kid—the hombre who dry-gulched Cy Borden out in the pass yesterday!" he snarled. "This is goin' to take some explainin' on your part, Ella. It looks like you been hidin' a wanted criminal—"

THE kitchen was supercharged with suspense as the Pinto Kid crossed the floor, thumb alert on gun hammer. In swift succession, he removed six-guns from the holsters of Burke Shane and Forty-rod Davrill, tossing them into a wood box alongside the kitchen stove.

"All right—you can lower your arms," he said. His gaze came to rest on the red-headed Cattle Association man. "I been wonderin' when you'd show up, Burke Shane."

Forty-rod Davrill pulled Lewella into the sheltering curve of his right arm. The Pinto Kid's glance swiveled to the girl.

"Miss Kendall," he went on, "has been laborin' under the delusion that *I* was Burke Shane. She didn't have nothin' to do with hidin' me from the law, Davrill. You can take her word for that."

The deputy sheriff cursed impotently as the Pinto Kid edged sidewise to open a door to a pantry adjacent the kitchen. Glancing inside to make sure the pantry was windowless, the Kid swung the door wide and then stepped back, his six-gun still covering the three.

"Miss Kendall, you've discovered that I'm an impostor," he said quietly. "Right now you're probably pretty well convinced that I'm the skunk who killed your foreman yesterday in cold blood, when he rode out to Cyclone Pass to meet Burke Shane."

He smiled crookedly as he saw the defiance and the hurt in the girl's eyes.

"I'm going to lock the three of you in this pantry," the Kid went on. "It'll probably take fifteen minutes for Shane and Davrill to batter a panel loose and get out. And by that time, I should be safe on the Mexican side of the Rio. But before I go, there's one thing I want

to know. Davrill told Shane a minute ago that he was goin' to marry you, Miss Kendall. Is that correct?"

Struggling hard to keep back the tears, the girl nodded jerkily.

"You're doggone right she's going to be my wife—as soon as I buy out the LK Connected!" stormed Forty-rod Davrill. "But I fail to see where that would interest a cow-tramp owl-hooter—"

Knots of muscle gathered on the Pinto Kid's jaws as he motioned for the trio to enter the pantry.

"I assure you I didn't ask the question for romantic reasons," was his enigmatical retort. "Miss Kendall, I regret that I'll have to borrow that pinto of yours. And now, *hasta la vista.*"

Davrill and Burke Shane, with Lewella Kendall between them, entered the narrow cubicle of the pantry. The Pinto Kid closed the door and snapped shut a sliding bolt. Then he stepped swiftly to the table where he had eaten and picked up the roll of cowhide he had been in the act of untying when Davrill and Shane arrived.

Then, shutting the kitchen door behind him, the Pinto Kid ran to the front gate where Lewella Kendall's leggy calico pony was hitched, and mounted for his ride to parts unknown.

CHAPTER VIII

TRAIL OF EL CHIRLO

AS the Pinto Kid had predicted, a good fifteen minutes elapsed before the combined efforts of Forty-rod Davrill and Burke Shane, working feverishly with a butcher's cleaver they had found in the pantry, succeeded in chopping through the hardwood door panels.

After that it was a simple matter for Davrill to thrust a sweat-grimed fist through the aperture and jerk back the bolt which held them prisoner inside the cubicle.

Slamming open the door, Davrill and the Cattle Association detective leaped first to the wood box to retrieve their six-guns, then hurried out on the kitchen porch.

"The skunk ain't anywhere in sight!" raged Davrill. "And he took Ella's horse, like he threatened to. Come on, Shane. He can't have much of a head start."

Lewella Kendall, hand pressed to her throat, stood in the doorway as the two lawmen hurried out to their waiting horses, circled briefly to pick up the Pinto Kid's trail, and then headed in the direction of the Rio Grande.

Face twisted with conflicting emotions, the girl turned back into the kitchen, her gaze resting bitterly on the dishes where the amazing Pinto Kid had devoured a meal less than a half-hour before.

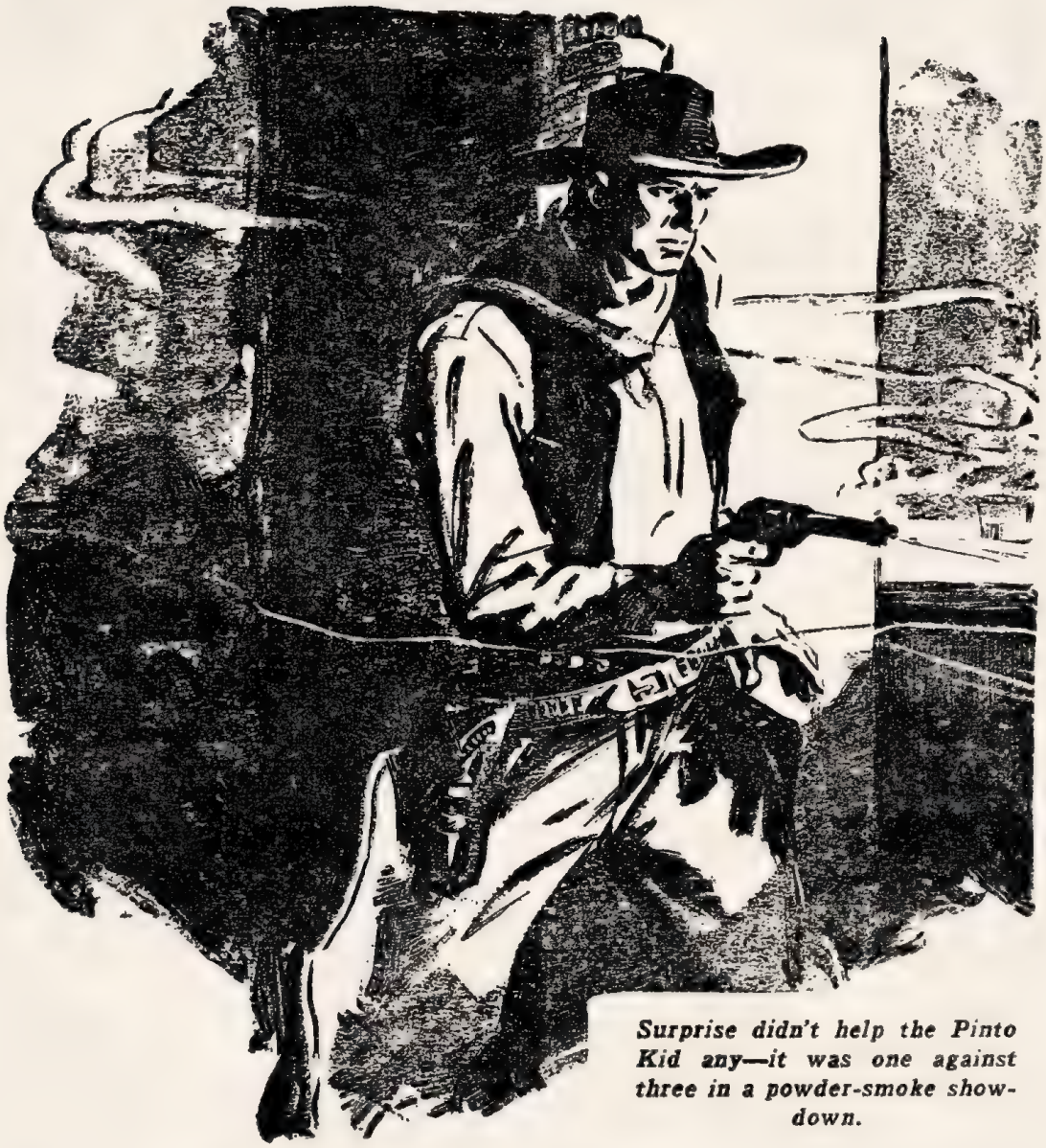
"It's not possible—and yet there can't be any doubt," she choked. "He tricked me into thinking he was Burke Shane so I'd try to keep Forty-rod from hunting him down last night—"

Hoofbeats outside the back-yard fence brought the girl outdoors ten minutes later, to see that Davrill and the red-headed range detective had returned empty-handed.

"We followed him to the river, about a quarter of a mile downstream," Davrill called. "He crossed over into Chihuahua at Ocotillo Ford. No chance of tracking him over in that malpais, with the head start he had."

Lewella walked out to the gate, to look up into the grim, freckle-dotted countenance of the El Paso detective.

"Mr. Davrill and I are going out to Cyclone Pass to look over the spot where your cowhands were mur-



Surprise didn't help the Pinto Kid any—it was one against three in a powder-smoke showdown.

dered yesterday, Miss Kendall," Shane said. "Don't you think you'd better stay in town—just in case this Pinto Kid shows up again?"

She vetoed the suggestion with a shake of her head.

"He won't be back," she said heavily. "He wouldn't dare. I don't want you men to worry about me."

Shane gathered up his reins briskly.

"Then let's be on our way, Davrill. El Chirlo's trail is already twenty-four hours old. I hope to get some trace, Miss Kendall, of the cattle you lost yesterday. That's why the C. A. sent me down here—to see if we can get to the bottom of this stock rustling."

THE sun had wheeled to the western horizon by the time Burke Shane and the Box Diamond owner had reached the bend in the canyon where the veteran LK Connected foreman, Cy Borden, had been shot from ambush.

Darkness had fallen over the canyon before the cattle detective, working with infinite patience, had finished going over the ground which still bore the bloodstains of cowpunchers whose remains now occupied slabs in the coroner's morgue.

"I'm camping here tonight, so that I can pick up El Chirlo's trail in the morning," said Shane, when the advance of nightfall made it impossible for the detective to continue his search for clues. "You can go back to town if you wish, Mr. Davrill, or if you care to share my blankets and the grub I've got in my saddlebags, you're welcome."

Forty-rod Davrill dismounted and stripped the saddle from his lathered horse.

"I've got as big a stake in this rustling set-up as my fiancée has," he said flatly. "I'll stick with you, Shane, and glad of the chance."

Sunrise found the two lawmen in saddle, pushing on down Cyclone

Pass until the canyon forked.

Daylight made trailing easy work. The cloven hoof marks of the LK Connected cattle herd entered the left-hand fork of the canyon, in the direction of the Rio Grande.

Even though the rustler sign was two days old, Burke Shane pointed out the tracks of steel-shod hoofs, where El Chirlo's massacre gang had hazed the Kendall beef herd toward the border river.

Within the hour the two lawmen reached the point where Cyclone Pass intersected the Rio Grande. The international boundary was the middle of the river, and the water foamed white over shallow gravel bars, indicating a ford.

"This is where El Chirlo's gang hazed his critters into Chihuahua, Davrill," said Burke Shane, his eyes slitting grimly as he surveyed the ominous badlands on the Mexican side of the river. "From here on, we're a couple of gringos without legal jurisdiction."

Davrill piled hands on saddlehorn and eyed the red-headed range detective quizzically.

"This is where we lose trace of El Chirlo's raiders—unless we cross into Mexico," he agreed. "Sheriff McGrew can't get a posse to cross into Chihuahua. And the Mex rurales don't help much. They say it's like hunting a needle in a haystack, to find out where El Chirlo runs his flitter ears."

Burke Shane hauled his saddle carbine from its boot under his right knee, levered a cartridge into the breech, and roweled his horse out into the muddy Rio. A moment later Forty-rod Davrill was spurring after the range detective.

Splashing out on barren Chihuahua soil, Shane reined to the westward, following the trail of stolen Texas stock into one of the countless barrancas which gouged the slopes of the Sierra Caliente foothills.

AS the sun climbed higher into the brassy heavens, the two Americans rode with increasing caution, for the hoof-trampled trail was zigzagging deeper into the sun-parched wastelands.

Every turn of the canyon trails was a potential death threat, now. No American lawman had ever penetrated this far into the desolate Sierra Calientes; this was owlhoot country, where ambush guns might blaze at any moment.

By noon, Shane figured they had covered twenty miles into the Mexican badlands. They passed a cliff-bordered meadow lush with buffalo grass, where there was ample evidence that the Kendall ranch herd had been bedded down at the end of the first day's trail drive following the Cyclone Pass massacre.

But the westering sun found the two lawmen pushing relentlessly on, through shadowy canyons where the hot sun rays were unable to reach them, then across mountain benches where riding was sheer torture in the pitiless heat.

"I'm for headin' back, Shane!" announced the Texas deputy when mid-afternoon found them skirting rimrocks that overlooked a vast, haze-filled basin. "El Chirlo may haze his rustled beef plumb to Hermosillo. We're fools to go any farther."

The Cattle Association star toter hipped over in saddle, easing the weight of the .30-30 under his arm.

"Take a look at that rimrock, Davrill!" Shane answered, leveling an arm toward the spot where the rimrock fell away into a basin a half-mile in diameter. "Something tells me we've reached trail's end."

Davrill's jaw hardened as he saw what Burke Shane meant. Clouds of dust were rising like smoke above the level of the cliff brink, not fifty yards before them. And then a shifting breeze wafted to their ears the unmistakable sound of bawling cattle, the clatter of horn on horn, the muted calls of men.

Of one accord, the two lawmen swung out of stirrups and hastily tied their lathered horses to a dead juniper snag growing at the foot of the slope to westward.

Then Davrill was following Shane who headed in a low-bent run toward the cliff edge which shut the basin floor from view.

The red-headed detective dropped down on hands and knees as he approached the brink of the chasm. Davrill followed suit, and the two lawmen wriggled snakelike to the edge of the rim.

Through a screen of prickly pear and ignota brush, they caught sight of a milling herd of Hereford stock, corralled in a circle of barbed-wire fencing.

Mexican vaqueros were busy cutting steers out of the herd and driving them to the corral gate. There other Mexicans were slapping hot branding irons onto the bawling animals.

"They're doin' their branding through wet gunnysacks!" whispered Shane excitedly. "That means they're blotting the LK Connected brand into something else so they can sell that stock north of the border a few months from now."

Reaching behind his back, Shane unsnapped a leather case which he carried on a shoulder strap, and removed a pair of binoculars.

Focusing the glasses on the Mexican brand blotters on the basin floor a hundred feet below, the Cattle Association man watched as he saw a red-hot iron applied to the rump of a bellowing steer that was kept grounded by the lariats of two mounted rustlers.

Steam sizzled from the wet burlap through which the brand was being applied, and when it was brought away and the steer allowed to lumber to its feet, the range detective got a clear view of the altered brand.

What he saw brought an exclamation of amazement to Shane's lips. He lowered the glasses to turn his gaze on the Texas rancher lying prone beside him.

"I'll be hanged!" whispered Shane. "The iron they're usin' is an LK Connected. But they turn it upside down an' plaster it on the original Kendall brand, so that it makes a—"

Forty-rod Davrill reared to his knees, his six-gun lifting in an arc over the redhead.

"It vents Kendall's iron into a Box Diamond!" snarled the Texan. "Blast you, Shane—"

Too late, the range detective saw Davrill's purpose. He tried desperately to roll out from under the whistling descent of the gun barrel, and then all went black as cold steel crashed against his Stetson to cut scalp and dent bone.

CHAPTER IX

GRINGO VENGEANCE

IT was dark when Burke Shane's eyelids fluttered open and he stared groggily about him. He was conscious of the fact that his arms were roped behind his back, and that his shoulder blades were propped against cold rock.

Then the range detective's vision focused on the yellow glare of a lantern, and he saw that he was inside an adobe-mortared stone shack,

seated on the floor with his back to the wall.

Three men were playing poker at a split-pole table, above which the lantern hung from a ceiling joist. As he shook the red cobwebs of pain from his eyes, Shane recognized one

of the players as his erstwhile trail partner, Forty-rod Davrill.

Seated opposite Davrill was a beefy-chested Mexican, clad in a ball-tasseled sombrero trimmed with gold braid to match his velveteen jacket and flared gaucho trousers. Double cartridge bandoleers crossed the Mexican's chest, and silver-mounted six-guns swung in ornate holsters on either thigh.

"Ah—our Johnny Law friend is wakin' up!" announced the third poker player, Davrill's segundo, Rojo Lake.

The three men scraped their powder-box chairs back from the table, and Burke Shane looked up into the trio of hostile faces with the same sensation that he would have faced the devil in Hell.

"You'll be El Chirlo," he grunted, as he saw the puckered scars which made a macabre cartoon out of the Mexican's face. "I didn't wise up soon enough when I saw you were branding your rustled stock with Davrill's iron."

Harsh laughter greeted the lawman's words. Davrill and El Chirlo came forward, gripped Shane by the armpits, and hauled him into a standing position against the wall.

"Yes," admitted the Texas rancher. "I could have put a slug through your noggin, Shane. But I figured I wouldn't cut El Chirlo out of that pleasure. You're the first American star toter who ever got wise to our rustlin' partnership, so I brought you over to El Chirlo's hide-out shack to play out your string in style."

The Mexican fingered the stock of a silver-mounted Colt, his flint-black eyes ranging up and down the rope-trussed figure of the range detective.

"We will not turn you eento buzzard bait without satisfying your curiosity, Señor Shane," said El Chirlo, with a mock bow. "Eet ees a simple bit of brand blotting, but eet has fooled your Cattle Association for the long time, *no es verdad?*"

SQUATTING, El Chirlo traced the LK Connected brand into the dust on the earthen floor of the shack.

"And then we simply turn over the Kendall iron," gloated Forty-rod Davrill, "make a couple of swipes with a running iron, and the cattle are ready to run back onto Box Diamond range."

Shane stared dully at El Chirlo's moving finger, as the Mexican added an inverted version of Lewella Kendall's brand alongside the original, gave a pair of short strokes to emulate the use of a running iron to com-

plete the square, and revealed the insignia of Forty-rod Davrill's Box Diamond.

"It ain't hard to figure out," Shane admitted. "You've rustled Kendall stock for years, El Chirlo, and converted 'em into Box Diamond critters. And Davrill's been sellin' your rustled beef at the El Paso railhead, after fattenin' 'em up on his own range, smack under Miss Kendall's nose. But killin' me won't guarantee you can keep it up. There'll be more John Laws along after me."

Davrill eyed his prisoner tauntingly.

"If it had been you instead o' the Pinto Kid who drifted into Cyclone Pass just after El Chirlo bushwhacked Cy Borden the other day," Davrill said, "you wouldn't have got into Mexico at all. El Chirlo was waitin' in Cyclone Pass for me an' my segundo here, Rojo Lake, to meet him. When Borden came along and spotted him, El Chirlo got boogery and thought maybe a posse was coming, so he plugged Cy Borden and vamoosed. Lake an' me figgered to make the Pinto Kid the goat for that raid, but—"

A chill draft swept into the room, and the three outlaws jerked about nervously as they saw the slab door of El Chirlo's shack swing open on its cowhide hinges.

Then their eyes almost jumped out of their sockets as they saw the weaving muzzle of a six-gun enter the lantern's glow.

"Elevate, hombres!" The voice from the blackness behind the gun was charged with warning and menace. "The first skunk who reaches for his cutter won't live to draw it."

Hope leaped in Burke Shane's being as he saw a towering figure with hair as red as his own duck under the lintel of the doorway. Standing spread-legged on El Chirlo's threshold was the Pinto Kid!

With a squall of desperation, the Mexican rustler chief streaked hands to gun butts, yanked silver-plated Colts from holsters. Beside him, Davrill reached for his own guns.

The .45 in the Pinto Kid's fist roared and bucked, and through pluming gun smoke the Cimarron cowpuncher saw El Chirlo knocked backward by the impact of the slug which smashed through his scar-puckered forehead.

Before the Mexican's knees could give way beneath the weight of dead flesh, Forty-rod Davrill had dropped to a crouch with the Pinto Kid's second shot screaming over his head.

Six-guns blazed in the Box Diamond owner's hands, but his hastily aimed slugs flattened against the stone door jamb as the Pinto Kid swung his fuming gun down and tripped the hammer.

Davrill slumped sideways against Rojo Lake. A bullet from the Pinto Kid's gun had tunneled his heart. Then the rancher buckled and collapsed atop the corpse of his Mexican henchman.

Through milky layers of gun smoke, the Pinto Kid leveled his Colt at the Box Diamond segundo, but the fight had gone from Rojo Lake. He dropped an unfired Peacemaker and threw up his arms, babbling incoherently in surrender.

STEPPING forward into the death-hushed cabin, the Pinto Kid knelt to rummage into the pockets of Davrill's frock coat. When he stood up to face Lake, the deputy sheriff's handcuffs dangled in his grasp.

Snapping the manacles over the Box Diamond foreman's bony wrists, the Pinto Kid thrust his smoking Colt into holster and then appeared

to notice Burke Shane for the first time.

"Then . . . then you ain't one of El Chirlo's men," gasped the range detective. The Pinto Kid had picked up a butcher knife from El Chirlo's table and started cutting the lawman's bonds.

The Pinto Kid laughed, as he severed the last of Shane's ropes and saw the detective's arms come free.

"Holy mackerel, no!" he grinned. "I'm down here in Chihuahua for the same reason you are, Shane. I tracked them rustled steers down here into the Sierra Calientes, a few miles ahead of you and Davrill. As a matter of fact, I was spyin' on those brand blotters up on the ridge when I saw Davrill haulin' you over to this shack. Otherwise maybe I wouldn't have located El Chirlo's hide-out so easy."

Burke Shane stared at the cowboy with new understanding dawning in his eyes.

"You say you're down here for the same reason that brought me," he repeated the Kid's statement. "Meanin' what? Who are you anyway, Pinto Kid?"

For answer, the Cimarron cowpuncher unbuttoned his shirt. Revealed on the inner side of the garment was the blue and gold shield of a United States Border Patrolman.

"We've been- workin' on El Chirlo's rustlin' case for a year, Shane," the Kid explained. "I've got a piece of cowhide in my pocket right now, cut from a steer that Forty-rod Davrill sold in El Paso last year. You can see where the LK Connected brand was vented into the Box Diamond."

Shane's jaw dropped in amazement.

"Then—you knew Davrill was robbin' Miss Kendall blind?"

The Pinto Kid grinned. "I came down to Davrill's range to try and prove that," he said. "That was why I couldn't tell Davrill who I was, or why I was around his section of the border."

He laughed reminiscently, toeing Davrill's corpse.

"I almost tipped my cards to Lewella Kendall yesterday," he admitted. "That was before I knew she was plannin' to marry the very man I figured was rustling her stock. You showed up in time to keep me from identifyin' myself to her, Shane."

Rojo Lake had settled himself on a powder box. His face was bleak with despair as he saw the two redheads step to the door and peer out into the Mexican night.

"We're two miles from the basin where El Chirlo's vaqueros are doin' their brand blottin'," the Pinto Kid informed Shane. "I figure we'll have time to bring back a troop o' rurales and round 'em up before they start wonderin' what's become o' their boss. And Rojo Lake here will do plenty of squealin' to save his own mangy neck from the hang rope, I reckon."

The Pinto Kid's eyes had a faraway look as he watched Burke Shane unbuckling a shell belt and holstered revolver from El Chirlo's corpse.

"You know, Shane, I got a hunch this may be the last job I'll be doin' for the Border Patrol," the cowboy remarked. "Ranchin' is my first love, not totin' a badge. Unless I miss my guess, I'm thinkin' that Lewella Kendall will change her mind about givin' up the LK Connected. And she'll be needin' a good foreman. I sure hopes she likes redheads."

THE END.

Indians were bad enough but when they were led by white renegades that wagon train was doomed!

TEST OF A WAGON BOSS

BY ROLLAND LYNCH

Blustering, bullying Bad Bill Orengo didn't even stop to count the men he dropped by the side of the trail as he pushed wagon trains relentlessly to the far reaches of the perilous, Indian-menaced frontier

WHEN the wagon train was dispersed at Santa Fe, Jim Cartigan was broke. It had taken all his meager funds to pay his way over the Trace. He was broke, yet he was rich. He knew the ease and comfort of wearing buckskin trousers and shirt and moccasins. The soft muscles of his arms had turned tough as rawhide. His chest had filled out and his face was bronzed by the prairie sun. He was rich in trail lore and his fund of human knowledge was greater. He had fought his way here because there was opportunity in this new land. If a man had strength and ambition there wasn't much to stop him here. But a man had to be hard and know how to fight. The men in the train

had pounded that into Jim all the way out. "You have to be hard and look out for yourself," was the way they put it.

Jim turned into the quaint adobe cantina called El Passe Tiempo and walked right into opportunity.

The bar was dim and the air musty smelling, for little light or ventilation got through the high, barred windows. Maybe that was the reason Bad Bill Orengo's voice sounded so loud. Maybe it was the importance Bad Bill attached to himself. Even the drowsy Mexicans there on the bench in the cool of the back wall had pushed back their sombreros to listen to him. Jim Cartigan joined the men at the bar.

"So what will the people do that just came in on the new train? Take up land. They'll work like slaves and chance the weather that they'll get enough of a crop to feed them until they can improve their places. But in the bunch there'll be a few fighters; hard ones, smart ones that'll set up some kind of business or get into one where there's chance of advancement. Now take me—"

Bad Bill paused long enough to toss off his tequila. "I was new here once, but I took opportunity when it came along. When I went to work for the Goodnall Freight Line they had two wagons and four head of oxen. Look at her today. The only line known here that'll get freight to a destination on schedule. Why? Because I'm the best bullwhacker out of Santy Fe. I'm hard. I know how to drive. I built the line up so Goodnall could go East and buy into a railroad. One of these days I'll run the office here, be the biggest freighter in the New Mexican territory."

"With your luck," spoke up a smoothly handsome man in a dark box coat, "you should have turned to gambling. You could give me trumps in spades and beat me."

"Luck?" boomed Bad Bill. "I ride it like I would a hammer-headed bronc. Maybe it's luck, but mostly it's me. I'll tell you when I get to be manager of the biggest freight office in Santy Fe. Right now I'm looking for a meat fetcher for the run to Albuquerque—"

There was strange reaction to his words in the cantina. Men who had been listening to Bad Bill turned back to their glasses and started small conversation. The Mexicans along the back wall shoved their sombreros down over their eyes and dozed again. Jim Cartigan saw all this, but he saw opportunity, too, for a hard man. He stepped up to Orengo and said bluntly: "You've got yourself a meat fetcher."

The buzz of conversation stopped and men turned to stare as if someone stark mad had been loosed among them. Bad Bill ran his bleak eyes over Jim and nodded his shaggy head. He slapped a double eagle on the bar and said. "Get some chow and some sleep. We leave at dawn tomorrow." He tossed off another drink and stalked out.

JIM stared at the gold coin. He had spent his last one at the Cimarron Crossing. He broke the silence by saying to the bartender: "Monogram, straight." With a gusty sigh men began conversing again. This was none of their business.

But the gambler who had spoken to Bad Bill poured himself another drink and met Jim's eyes as he downed it. "Good luck," he drawled.

With the warm flush of his drink on his cheeks, Jim chuckled. "The bar mirror tells me I'm not as crazy as you think I look."

The gambler's thin lips turned up in a faint grin. "Maybe not," he

said, "but your mouth has just done all it could to prove it."

"What's so crazy about taking a job?" Jim asked bluntly.

"Do you know Bad Bill Orengo?"

"I came in off the trail about a half a hour ago."

The gambler coughed and quickly poured himself another drink as he motioned to signify that his throat was bothering him. When he had downed the liquor, he said: "You still have time to quit. Orengo has the reputation of killing men if he must to get what he wants."

"He started out as a meat fetcher for Goodnall under Sam Jackson, one of the best freighters ever to crack a whip over a span of oxen. When Goodnall went East and sent John Avery back as freight master, Bad Bill got his break. He showed Avery that Jackson was too slow; where speed and schedule would step up the profits.

"Avery made Bad Bill head freighter. Two years ago, Orengo tied his drivers to their seats, hooked one wagon behind another and ran his train right through the whole Apache tribe. He beat the time for the trip by two weeks, but he made Las Vegas with two drivers alive out of ten.

"Bad Bill went over the Ratoon Pass to La Junta in the dead of winter when no one else would chance it," the gambler continued. "He froze the arms and legs off men, yet he made the run in a month's less time than it has ever taken anyone else. He had a few emigrants along, and he got them through safe, hide and baggage. Most of their hair had turned white, though. The man is shot with luck himself, but those who work for him die young. If you want to return him that double eagle and quit, I'll stand for your drink."

Jim looked down at his hands and scrubbed his palms together. He picked up his change. "A man like that draws opportunity like a magnet draws pins," he said. "I'm hungry. Eat with me?"

The gambler shook his head. Jim nodded and turned from the saloon.

Jim went down the boardwalk, shaded by wood awnings, toward the restaurant. There was an old-world softness about this town.

Over his meal of tacos and strong black coffee, he decided that he might be as lucky as Bad Bill Orengo. Hadn't he escaped a dull existence in the East? Hadn't he walked right into this job when he didn't have a dollar to his name? Maybe he would be lucky, too. He must be hard and watch for opportunities. That was the way to fight a new land.

JIM spent the night in the loft above the town corral. With a huge breakfast pushing at his rawhide belt, he joined Bad Bill Orengo's caravan just as the sky began to hint of the coming sun.

Jim had seen strange men along the route between Saint Joe and Santa Fe, but he had never seen a stranger gathering than the one that was clustered about Bad Bill. The Mex cavvy tender had a knife scar that ran from under his right eye, down across his cheek and then cut back to his ear. It drew up the corner of his thick lip, and gave him an ugly sneer. There was a huge, red-headed giant called Mulcy Jones who was wide across the shoulders as an ox is across the withers. He was a loud-talking, good-natured man, but big and strong as he was, there was a cautious streak in him. He always seemed to be trying to say the right things. He wasn't

hard. The rest of the crew were flotsam of this trail's end town.

Bad Bill gave Jim his instructions. "You'll ride right point during the day while Mulcy rides left. Keep your gun ready and do as I tell you. You'll fetch meat by getting up just before dawn each day. The rest of the time you'll stay by the wagons and help see they're kept moving."

"I can stand up as well as the next man," said Jim.

Bad Bill's bushy brows drew together. "We'll see," he retorted.

"I heard last night that the Zunis have put on some paint and are raising the devil around the San Mateos," Mulcy Jones remarked. "Maybe we ought to walk pretty light."

"I'll tell you when to walk light," Orengo said curtly. "Stretch out now."

The drivers went to their wagons and hoisted onto the seats. Jim took the rifle and ammunition laid out for him and the horse the cavvy tender had chosen. He swung into the saddle and reined wide as the wagons sawed into position. When the ten of them were stretched out, Bad Bill got into his saddle and rode to the head of the train. With a wave of his hand, he led them into the tumbling plain.

In the following days, Jim Cartigan found out what trail work was. He was in the saddle from false dawn until dark, ranging wide from the sleepy camp each morning in search of game. With a restless energy that bordered on madness, Bad Bill Orengo drove his men and teams almost to the point of exhaustion. Yet neither broke down under the strain. No lameness showed to slow the oxen; no sickness broke out among the men.

Noon of the twelfth day they saw the war smoke of the Zunis. Over amid the tumbling reaches of the San Mateos balls of smoke rose heavenward, cut sharply by a blanket in expert hands. Mulcy Jones reined in to where Bad Bill rode just ahead of the lead team.

"That's trouble," he said soberly. "There's a war party somewhere close."

Bad Bill ignored him. He kept turned in his saddle reading the puffball signals. Finally, he became conscious that Jim had come closer, so he spoke to Mulcy: "You seen any yet?"

"No."

"Then don't get scared until you do." Bad Bill looked defiantly over at Jim. Jim grinned and nodded his head that anything that might be done was all right with him. The bullwhacker scowled.

A cloud of dust boiled over a rise and a hard-running stagecoach followed it. Bad Bill signaled a halt to wait for the careening vehicle.

The driver pulled up beside the freight train, his brake screeching, horses lathered and blowing heavily. The driver had a bandanna tied about his shoulder, but the blood from his wound had soaked through. A body lay face up on the boot, its head beside the driver, mouth open and eyes closed. From inside the coach two women in crinoline and a perspiring drummer peeked fearfully out.

"We just barely outrun 'em," said the driver. "Fifty or so of 'em. Guess Ol' Buckskin's dead."

"Better luck next time," said Bad Bill Orengo.

The driver swallowed hard. "You goin' on—with oxen?"

"See you when you get back to Albuquerque," said Orengo and signaled his drivers on.

Jim touched the flanks of his horse, looking back over his shoul-

der at the staring driver. When the stage rolled on, he was unconsciously riding straight in the saddle, body leaning forward a little and the hammer of his rifle eared back.

Bad Bill rode back along the line and gave instructions to his drivers: "Get down now while you have time and hook them tail-gate chains to the end of your trees. If a fight starts, let go of the reins and shoot with both hands."

Men wrapped their reins around whip stocks and crawled forward on the trees. They reached out and got hold of the chain dangling from the wagon ahead and hooked it on the tree end. The wagons were linked now so that a fallen driver would not break the line. Orengo turned to the head of the caravan.

THERE was but a half-hour of big daylight left when the copper-torsoed men came over the swell of the plain. Mulcy Jones shouted and blazed away with his rifle. With sheer reflex action Jim shot and emptied a saddle. Bad Bill Orengo shouted shrilly and urged the drivers to speed their oxen. The train broke into a lumbering run. Bad Bill turned and headed his caravan straight into the redskin ranks.

Jim saw the strategy of that immediately. Surprise was on those hideously painted faces. Here was a small group that charged them instead of breaking up in disorder and falling easy prey. Even a driver rolling from his seat did not break the line. The band split before the lumbering juggernaut, ran past and turned to stand and watch while Bad Bill's train raced on toward its destination. Eight riderless ponies plunged about.

That evening after the wagons had pulled into the security of Albuquerque, Mulcy Jones wiped sweat from his sun-blistered brow. "He did it again," he told Jim. "The man's shot with luck."

"He just has the courage to keep going," Jim said. "He's hard."

"Call it what you want," said Mulcy, "but what kept them Injuns from turnin' and chasin' us?" He left the question right there and Jim could see that cautious Mulcy Jones considered what happened a miracle. Jim figured it might be luck. If it was, it was just what a man needed to fight this new country.

But suddenly Bad Bill's luck changed. There was a consignment of farm machinery for San Marcial, but the six-day fiesta here in Albuquerque kept Orengo from getting it. The doors of the warehouse were locked. Four families were joining the train to make the perilous trip across the Rio Grande and down the backs to the Black Range country. Jim found Bad Bill near the plaza loudly cursing.

"There's no use getting so mad," said Jim. "This is an unavoidable delay."

"At my expense," Bad Bill growled. "I risk my reputation to get this freight out on schedule and what do they do? Have a fiesta. Sign me four families to make the trip. Just when I had the managership—"

"Managership?"

Bad Bill spat angrily. "Right in the palm of my hand. Avery told me if I made the trip on time from here to San Marcial and returned on schedule he'd recommend me to Harvey Goodnall for his job at Santy Fe. Goodnall is coming out to get Avery and take him back East to work on the railroad."

"You're the luckiest, and hardest man in the territory," Jim grinned. "You might make it yet."

Orengo's lips creased tight. "I'll

make it," he said. "Make it if I have to kill every animal and man working for the line. Nothin's going to stop me when there's an opportunity—"

Jim didn't listen to any more. The newly married couple that would make the trip to San Marcial with Orengo strolled past. They were blissfully ignorant of what lay ahead for them. The romance they should enjoy to start their lives together would suffer under Orengo's driving ruthlessness. But as quickly as Jim saw that, he closed his eyes to it. He was only a meat fetcher, looking for opportunity himself. He had to be hard, too. What happened to other people didn't concern him. If he sided in with Bad Bill and fought, maybe Orengo would make him wagon master after he got his own appointment.

DAWN of Monday morning saw Bad Bill's train pull out for San Marcial. There were twelve wagons loaded with freight, the San Marcial pioneers and their four Conestogas filled with the worldly goods of their owners. The young couple sat on the seat of their wagon together, their faces shining and eager for the new land to which they were going. As Jim reined past them to take his place at right point he tipped his hat and drew a friendly grin from the boy and a smile from the girl. Ahead of them in the next wagon was a broad-faced Midwesterner out to make his mark. His buxom wife was back in the wagon bed caring for the children.

Bad Bill Orengo drove the train mercilessly through the following days. But his luck was on the wane. An ox bowed a tendon and had to be cut out of the traces. Orengo's cursing and rantings made everyone sullen. It took the glow from the faces of the young couple. They had no time to talk and dream and take the sting out of the uncertainties that lay ahead. One oldster who was moving his family to the edge of the Rio Grande spoke up to Bad Bill one day.

"What's the hurry?" he asked. "This territoy's been here for centuries and you're running like it's going to be gone if we don't get there on a certain day at a certain hour. My stock won't stand it."

"You keep 'em in shape or drop out," snapped Bad Bill.

That settled that.

The caravan hit the Rio Grande after six solid days of rain and with threatening skies, pausing only for a moment before beginning a fresh deluge. Where the shallow Sirocco Ford had once been now roared a turbulent current. The capricious river had gouged the ford away. The slate-gray water surged angrily at its banks.

Jim was in the group that met at the water's edge. Mulcy Jones shook his shaggy head. "It'll be three weeks after the rain quits before the water goes down."

"We'll be in San Marcial in less than that," said Bad Bill.

"You're a fool to even think of it," said an oldester sharply. "I'm staying here."

Orengo nodded. "Go ahead. But the freight goes on. I waited through a fiesta, had you wished on me, lost an ox and saw six days of rain. I'm almost back on schedule now and no river's going to stop me. Those that want to stay can. The rest of you start cutting joshua trunks to buoy up the wagons. Get going!"

For a long moment the men stared into Bad Bill's face. They saw fanatical determination there. Sullenly, the freighters turned away to

obey. The emigrant men followed them slowly. The air resounded to the sound of axes as they attacked the stunted and grotesque desert trees.

Jim moved slowly as he helped, watching the fearful eyes of the men as they turned to gauge the river. The young bride stood in the mud watching her man work, her eyes never leaving him. The rest stayed close to their wagons, fascinated by the surging river. By watching them, Jim discovered a startling thing. They were all being forced into being hard and courageous. Right now a sympathetic hand could make them buck the swollen waters with a grin instead of fear. It wasn't right for a man to be too hard and relentless with people. That only put fear in them and then made them hate you afterward.

When the rafts were lashed beneath the wagons, Orengo gave his orders: "Each man to his place. Mulcy and you, Cartigan, wait here on the bank with your ropes handy. First team you see weakning, get into the water and hitch on and help. Come on."

He tied his own lariat to the tree of the lead wagon and waved the driver on. Jim got a glimpse of the first man's face as the oxen plodded into the water. It was white and set. One after another the wagons followed.

With rope in hand and knuckles white from holding it so tightly in his fist, Jim watched the lead wagon take the current and begin to swing. Bad Bill rolled off his horse and grabbed the animal by the tail. Then he beat it between the ears with the hondo of his lariat. The laboring horse and oxen drifted with the surge of the river, but they crawled steadily across.

Then a wild cry burst from Jim's lips. The wagon of the young couple was careening in midstream. Some of the logs had come loose from the lashings and had ruined the balance.

Spurring furiously, Jim hit the water. He slipped out of the saddle, holding to his mount's tail, and ranged the anmial alongside the wagon. Half drowning himself, he managed to get the logs straight and get his rope around a cleat so that he could pull them tight against the wagon bed again. With teeth clenched against the buffeting, he saw them safely to shore. They were the last across. The young man's lips were tight and bloodless, the girl's face a frightened alabaster-white. Bad Bill wasted no cheering words on them.

"Get those logs off of the wagon and let's get on," he ordered brusquely.

Jim came out of his daze a few moments later. He was riding point again, shivering a little from the river's chill. The Rio was to his right now as Bad Bill paralleled it toward San Marcial. Orengo had done it again—beaten the swollen river. His luck had come back.

IN another week, the sun broke through the clouds and steam swirled from oxen and canvas and buckskin. Still, Bad Bill drove on. He seemed contented now. He was almost back on schedule. Only two days behind. With his luck, he'd make that up and then some. He had kept opportunity from slipping away.

It was during the false dawn hunting hours allotted him that Jim came upon the band of Mescaleros. He didn't ride directly onto them, but with that instinct a man developes when he lives close to danger, he found the scouts studying the Orengo caravan from the rocky

slopes of the Sangres. He saw something, too, that raised the hair on the back of his neck. There were three white renegades among them. He quickly returned to camp.

"A band of Mescaleros," he told Bad Bill. "Led by three white men."

"Prader, Mangrum, and Closs," Orengo swore heavily. Then he bawled: "Catch up the teams. Hook the wagons together. We'll give the devils a run for their booty."

Jim was so amazed he could not remain silent. "You'll lose most of the men if you do that," he objected.

"When I want your advice I'll ask it," snarled Orengo.

"You'll listen now," said Jim patiently. Out of the tail of his eye he could see the white and frightened face of the young bride. "You might surprise a band of Zunis or Apaches, but these Mescaleros are different. They're led by white men."

"You trying to tell me about my business?" demanded Bad Bill.

Jim's fists knotted at his sides. "I'm telling you we wouldn't have a chance in a running fight. I've listened to enough stories of the Mescaleros to know that they will stay off and shoot down our animals and disrupt the train. They'll have us strewn all over the desert floor. Compact here, we have a chance. These people, drivers and all, are human beings and they've got to have a chance at fighting for themselves."

"You give the drivers a hand harnessing up," ordered Orengo angrily.

Jim swung his fist. As it landed he knew he had knocked himself right out of any opportunity that might have come his way. He had violated a serious code of the plains in going against his wagon master. Right now he didn't give a hoot.

Bad Bill went down on the ground like a poled steer and Jim looked around at the blank faces. "Get the stock inside the wagons," he ordered. "Before the sun's brush-high we'll be fighting."

As though his assurance kindled their own, they jumped to obey. Jim lifted the inert Orengo and dragged him to a huge Conestoga wheel. He cut some lengths from a lariat and bound the man there. As he finished, Orengo came to.

"I'll gun you down for this," he roared. "I'll have you blacklisted by every freight line west of the Mississippi. Turn me loose, one of you boys, I'm wagon master here."

No one moved. "Were," corrected Jim.

"You're fired. You're—" Orengo choked off.

"I don't care. There's a time and place for bullheadedness and for being hard. This isn't one of them." Jim turned quickly as Mulcy Jones shouted: "Here they come."

The next few hours were a nightmare of yelling, charging men and the thunder of rifles. During each moment's respite, Jim looked about his pitifully small circle and counted heads. Only one man was down, the Mex cavvy tender. He lay on his back, his agonized face turned to the climbing sun. The young bride reloaded rifles for her husband, staying close to him, touching him whenever she could. There was something about her actions that lifted Jim, told him that he had done the right thing in taking charge. He was doing what the majority would have voted to do; not just a selfish thing for his own personal gain.

Out there the white renegades led the attack. They continually formed and reformed the Mescaleros for charges. But each time the caravan broke up the attack.

THEN down the wind came sharp notes of a bugle. Blue-coated men were streaming upon the embattled caravan, with the thirteen stripes and twenty-two stars of the flag standing stiffly in the breeze. The Mescaleros broke and scattered like quail.

The charging soldiers were almost upon the caravan before Jim noticed that a man in range clothes rode beside the captain. The people of the train crowded together, the young husband holding his wife tight, the older men waving their hats and the women their handkerchiefs.

At a quick command from the ranking officer, more than half of the troop went off in pursuit of the raiders. The officer and man in range garb quit their horses and stepped into the arena of freight and Conestoga wagons. The silvery-haired man siding the officer glanced around.

"Where's Bill Orengo?" he asked.

This must be the owner of the Goodnall Freight Line, Jim decided. He pointed toward the wagon wheel where Bad Bill was lashed.

Goodnall turned and stared. Then he turned his stern eyes on Jim, "What's the meaning of this?" he demanded.

Jim's fists clenched again. "Orengo wanted to try and outrun the raiding party and I didn't see it that way. I took charge."

"Cut him loose," Goodnall ordered the captain. He turned back to Jim. "So you took charge! What made you think your judgment was better than the wagon master's?"

"There were men and women to consider," Jim said evenly. "If you or Bill Orengo have no consideration, I have. I just learned it. I thought you had to be hard to get along in this country. Well, you do, but you don't have to carry it beyond humanity. Where people and animals are concerned you have to use judgment and put personal reputation aside. I did it and I'd do it again."

A slow smile spread over Goodnall's whiskered face. "When I saw you were circled and fighting I was prepared to offer congratulations to Orengo for showing a little horse sense," he confided. "Guess I'll have to offer them to you instead. Looks like you know how hard to be and how to fight when your mind's made up. I heard of the white renegades leading the Mescaleros in this country and knew that Bill was making this trip. That was why I got this detachment and tried to cut you off at Sirocco Ford. When we got there and found you had crossed, right then I knew Orengo was a fool. He's done on this line. His driving for personal gain has made us enemies. There's a freight master's job for you at Santa Fe if you'd like to have it."

For a second the import of the words did not dawn on Jim. Then he was suddenly breathless, seeing opporunity opening up before him. "You've got yourself a manager," he said and took Goodnall's outstretched hand.

"Fine," Goodnall said, and turned to Bill Orengo. Jim didn't listen to what the freight line owner was saying. He was looking at the young couple. The husband was nodding his head and grinning his congratulations and the girl was smiling at Jim through her tears. The eagerness was coming back into their faces. They were looking forward to the opportunities that lay in the future. Like Jim himself, they were new to this country—but hard enough to give it a fight.

THE END

Only smashing, searing lead would break the hold of the murdering hellions that infested Jubilo Junction—and the man who wore the law's brand was gun shy!

Through the swirling streamers of gun smoke Lee saw Tex Fagan clutch at the lamp-post as he went down.

HOT-LEAD LEGACY

BY L. ERNENWEIN

LEE HARLEQUIN'S return to Jubilo Junction was quiet. He arrived an hour after dark, dropping from a westbound train before it came to a full stop at the station. Behind him, in Tucson, a telegraph key's brassy chatter had spelled out his name in Morse signals, dots and dashes that said: "Your father was shot by Buck Yardley. He is dying."

Harlequin's tall, store-garbed frame cast a long shadow across the lantern-lit platform, and his brown eyes were bleak. The *clickity-clack*

of a telegraph instrument came now from the depot's doorway, that familiar sound bringing a reflective twist to his lips as he turned toward Main Street. He had learned the Morse code at this station, and had got his first job with Arizona Pacific on his nineteenth birthday. Recalling his father's deep disappointment on that occasion, Lee's mouth tightened.

Big Bill Harlequin, who had been city marshal here in Jubilo Junction for fifteen years, had wanted his son to take over the law badge when the time came for an old man to hang up his gun. He had trained Lee from boyhood with that one purpose in mind. But the newfangled telegraph had held a powerful attraction for Lee Harlequin; he had taken to it like a young bronc seeking new pastures. And now Big Bill was dying—

Main Street was crammed with the Saturday-night traffic. Saddled horses, buggies and ranch wagons were wedged solidly at hitch racks; miners and cowpunchers roamed the boardwalks. Lee Harlequin hurried toward the Mansion House Hotel, feeling the full bitterness of a prodigal's return. He had lived in this town most of the years he could remember, yet somehow it had never seemed like home to him. Perhaps that was because Big Bill, worshiping one woman, would have no other around after she died. He and Lee had shared a front room at the Mansion House, and had taken their meals at Sam Ling's Oriental Café.

Directly across from the hotel was the Ace High Saloon, its chandeliers sending a bright bloom of light out into the street's yellow dust. Inside, standing at the long rosewood bar, Tex Fagan conversed quietly with Mayor Buck Yardley.

"Lee Harlequin is heading for the Mansion House," the saloon owner reported. "You figger he'll try to square for Big Bill's shootin'?"

A bland smile bulged Buck Yardley's beefy, pock-pitted face. He reached for a bottle of bourbon and said scoffingly: "Hell, no. Young Harlequin was born yellow, and never got over it. If he'd had any guts he wouldn't 've taken up telegraphing when his old man was about ready to retire. Lee knew he was slated to inherit the badge—so he took a run-out to dodge it."

Tex Fagan chuckled. "Reckon you got him tallied right, Buck. He won't cause you no trouble you can't handle."

Yardley poured his drink, filling the glass so full that three pearllike drops ran over the rim. When he lifted the glass to his lips he licked up that small trickle before downing the drink. After which he smacked his thick lips with a greedy man's relish and glanced toward the gambling tables at the rear of the room.

"See you've hired that El Paso card shark," he mused softly. "The one Big Bill said would never deal cards in this town. And I wouldn't be surprised if that roulette wheel had a gimmick on it that'll keep the players from winning more than an occasional bet."

A crafty smile creased Fagan's chalky cheeks. He said: "Looks like good times finally came to Jubilo Junction, in spite of Big Bill and Pat Shannon. They kept us waitin' a long time, Buck. Now we're collectin' double."

"From the way the merchants are squawking anybody'd think you were collecting triple," the mayor reflected. He turned toward the batwings, then added confidentially: "I'm calling on Spanish Joe, to tell him not to forget my percentage of

tonight's winnings. Don't suppose I need to remind you, eh, Tex?"

Fagan shook his head, his crafty smile widening. "Stop in along about midnight," he suggested. "I'll have the bundle all wrapped and waiting for you."

LEE HARLEQUIN climbed the Mansion House steps and glanced at the compact group of men who stood on the veranda. There was little light here, and their faces were indistinct, but he recognized Pat Shannon, who had been mayor for ten years, and old Ike Mendolson, who ran the Mercantile Emporium. Not one of them spoke to him, yet the impact of their eyes was like a tangible force against him. When he strode through the doorway he heard a man mutter: "The key rattler has come back—now that it's too late."

But when Lee walked into the lobby, Peg-leg O'Shea, bald and bearded, reared up from his chair like a startled walrus. "The saints be praised!" he exclaimed. "They was sayin' you wouldn't come back. I'm glad ye got here in time, lad. Big Bill has been callin' yer name all this day."

The old Irishman's words brought a tight lump into Lee Harlequin's throat. He tried to swallow it. But he couldn't. And he couldn't speak. Going quickly upstairs, he remembered all the times he had climbed this rickety stairway with Big Bill—

Gail Shannon sat just outside the doorway to No. 3, making a small and resolute shape against the inner lamplight. She said "Lee!" softly.

The firm pressure of her slim fingers told him at once how glad she was to see him, and how sorry she was for his father. Then she sat there waiting while he went on into the room.

Big Bill lay flat on his back, his massive face white as the pillow upon which it rested. For a hushed instant it seemed to Lee that his father's deep-socketed eyes were on the verge of opening, that the old, tolerant smile was about to ease the bloodless lips.

But Big Bill's eyes didn't open. His lips didn't smile, and the only sound that disturbed the room's tomblike silence was the rasp of his labored breathing. There was a congealed set to his feature, a waxlike rigidity that was devoid of all natural expression. Even his hands seemed different; palms up and fingers clenched, they seemed, somehow, like tools no longer needed.

In that strangely suspended moment Lee Harlequin remembered his father's farewell speech the day Lee left for Tucson. "Don't forget to practice that draw I taught you," Big Bill had counseled. "The new mine boom here will make this town tough to handle. I might have to send for you some day, son, so keep your wrist limbered up."

It occurred to Lee then that his father hadn't sent for him—that he would never send for him. Big Bill was beyond needing gun help now. He was beyond needing anything—except revenge!

Lee glanced at the wall pegs, saw Big Bill's battered black Stetson and the faded blue shirt with the bachelor patches in the elbows, and a star pattern on the breast pocket where the badge had long protected the cloth against fading. There were three holes in that pocket; the star's fastener had made two of them—

Then Lee Harlequin saw his father's gun belt. The cartridges set up a brassy shine in the bracket lamp's glow, and the Peacemaker's mahogany butt was discolored by long usage, by the sweat of fingers

which would never grip it again. He stepped quietly across the room, lifted the heavy gun from its holster, and stood for a long moment considering it. This was the gun Big Bill had taught him to draw, swiftly and smoothly, in one fluid motion. But that had been a long time ago. Lee hadn't followed his father's counsel to keep in practice. The gun felt strange in his hands; it was like holding something long forgotten.

A SLIGHT sound from the doorway brought Lee's glance around, and he saw Gail Shannon step into the room. She came slowly to him, her eyes shifting from his face to the gun, and then back to his face.

"Still gun shy?" she asked quietly.

He glanced down at her, seeing the way her blond hair made a golden frame for her face, and how her limpid blue eyes quietly considered him. Even here, with grief and regret clawing at him, there was a warmth in this girl's eyes that strongly touched Lee Harlequin. It had always been this way between them. She had been the only one to understand his inherent dislike for violence. She hadn't admired that weakness, but neither had she condemned it. And she had helped him keep his secret from Big Bill.

Lee said finally, "Yes, Gail," and sheathed the Peacemaker. "How did Yardley come to shoot dad?"

"The town's tough element finally succeeded in electing Buck Yardley mayor," she explained. "Yesterday he discharged your father, saying Big Bill was too old for the marshal job. When your father turned in his badge, he asked who was going to wear it. Yardley said Sid Severeid, one of the crooks who helped him steal the election from dad."

"Wasn't Severeid Tex Fagan's bouncer at the Ace High?"

Gail nodded. "Your father knew what such a combination would mean to Jubilo Junction. He said he'd kill Severeid before he'd see him wearing the marshal's badge. And that's what he did, an hour before Severeid was supposed to take office. But Buck Yardley was with Severeid when the shooting started. His bullet went through your dad's pocket, between the pin holes where the badge used to be."

That grim information made Lee remember something else Big Bill had once told him. "It's a peculiar thing," his father had explained, "but take two men of equal gun skill and the one wearing the law badge has a little the best of it. Maybe it's because his mind ain't all cluttered up with personal things

ADV—4

like anger or pride or resentment. Whatever it is, the badge tips the scales in a lawman's favor."

But Big Bill hadn't been wearing the badge in his last battle!

Lee shivered. "Dad killed the wrong man," he said. "He should have shot Buck Yardley."

The girl was about to make some comment, when Doc Cavanaugh bustled into the room with his little black satchel.

The pudgy-faced medico glanced briefly at Lee and said: "I'm going to stay with Bill while you take Gail out for some nourishment. She's had no supper."

Harlequin looked at his father. "How much longer?" he asked huskily.

"Hard telling. He has a heart like a steel-dust stallion. A weaker man would have died a lot sooner—and easier. Slow death is the penalty a strong man has to pay."

"We'll be at the Oriental," Lee said. "If dad wakes up send for me quick."

They went downstairs and were crossing the lobby when Gail's father hurried in from the street. The scholarly, gray-haired ex-mayor said, "Hello, Lee," and dug a silver star from his vest pocket. "I've just committed my first larceny," he added quietly.

"How did you get it?" Gail asked.

"Used my old key to the mayor's office, and stole it from Yardley's desk."

"Why?" Harlequin asked wonderingly.

For a moment Pat Shannon didn't answer. He just stood there looking at the tarnished old badge with its small-lettered inscription: "Marshal." When he finally spoke there was a note of sarcasm in his voice.

"Big Bill was delirious all day. He said you'd come back to kill Buck Yardley. He seems to thing I'm still mayor—made me promise to pin the star on you."

"I see," Lee said very quietly, and escorted Gail past the silent group on the veranda.

PRESENTLY, with a cup of Sam Ling's black coffee inside him, Lee watched Gail Shannon eat her supper. There had been a time when he had expected to marry this blond-haired girl. But that idea had been sidetracked by his eagerness to leave Jubilo Junction. Now there was no chance at all. She knew he was a coward, and girls like Gail Shannon didn't marry cowards.

A mirthless, self-mocking smile twisted Lee's lips. "I ran away from the marshal badge a year ago," he remarked, almost to himself. "But it's still waiting for me."

Gail put down her fork. "There are things you can't run away from, Lee," she said softly. "It's time you learned that."

"But I'm no part of a gun fighter!" he exclaimed. "I'm a telegraph operator. What chance would I have against Buck Yardley? I haven't handled a gun since I left here; I've been handling telegraph keys!"

"Have you forgotten what Big Bill told you about fast shooting?" Gail asked.

A puzzled frown clouded Lee's face. "What're you driving at?" he demanded.

Gail got up. "That's something you'll have to remember for yourself, Lee," she said. "Big Bill meant it for gun work, but you used it for something else."

When they got back to the hotel, Peg-leg O'Shea met them on the veranda. "I was just comin' after ye!" he exclaimed. "Big Bill woke up!"

Lee rushed past the old man, took the stairs two at a time. Even before he reached the room he heard his father's gusty breathing—long, labored breaths that echoed down the hallway like the rasp of a rusty hinge.

Big Bill's eyes were open now. And he was smiling faintly as his son knelt beside the bed. "I knew . . . you'd come back," he muttered brokenly. "I've been . . . waiting . . . to see Mayor Pat . . . pin the badge on you, son."

The old lawman motioned weakly to Gail's father. "Swear in . . . our new marshal, Pat," he gasped. "He's going to get . . . Buck Yardley!"

Shannon came around the bed, touched Lee on the shoulder. "Stand up," he said gruffly.

Harlequin got to his feet, watched the ex-mayor pin on the badge, heard the authorization that should have sounded entirely faked, false as this mockery of pinning a badge on a quaking coward. But somehow the words didn't sound false. They sounded genuine, as if Pat Shannon were still mayor. Then abruptly it occurred to Lee Harlequin that in reality Pat Shannon *was* mayor; that Buck Yardley's ballot-box stuffing had been illegal!

"Congratulations . . . son!" Big Bill muttered weakly.

Lee grasped his father's trembling hand. He said, "I'll get Buck Yardley," and tried to look Big Bill squarely in the eye so the lie would sound convincing.

"Don't . . . don't forget . . . what I told you," Big Bill warned. "Remember what . . . I said about—"

But he never finished that sentence. His voice choked off in the middle of a word. A wild, startled stare came into his glazing eyes and the deep rattle of his breathing made a strange, horrible sound as he tried desperately to talk.

"Don't talk, dad," Lee cried urgently. "Just take it easy!"

Then for a long, heartbreaking moment he watched Big Bill make a tremendous effort to speak. And in that seemingly endless period between his father's living and dying, he remembered Doc Cavanaugh's words about slow death being the penalty a strong man had to pay. Here, then, was a brave man's reward for noble endeavor—a bullet-blasted body being cheated of the final favor of fast, merciful death!

In that awful, nerve-racking interval, Lee Harlequin looked at Doc Cavanaugh pleadingly. "Isn't there something you can do?"

But the medico soberly shook his head.

"Maybe he'd die easier if he knew you'd kept your promise," Shannon said quietly. "Maybe that's what he's waiting for."

The tone of his voice was quiet, almost casual. But his questing eyes were sharp. To Lee Harlequin they were like probes, seeking his hidden fear, drawing it out for all these others to see. Only Big Bill wouldn't see it; he'd die in a moment now and this nightmare would be ended!

But Big Bill didn't die. He kept mumbling crazily, "Don't forget . . . what I told you!"

Over and over it came, like the blood-throttled groan of a struggling steer, until Lee Harlequin could stand it no longer. Until Pat Shannon's words ran like a high, hellish chant through his mind: *Maybe he'd die easier if he knew you'd kept your promise. Maybe that's what he's waiting for.*

Whereupon Lee Harlequin did an astounding thing—a thing he had never intended to do. He strode to the gun hanging on the wall peg,

strapped it on in the dazed manner of a man not entirely awake, and walked hurriedly from the room.

GAIL SHANNON followed him into the hallway. Her voice held a strange mixture of gladness and grief. "I knew you'd remember what Big Bill told you," she said. "And I knew it would give you courage."

Lee Harlequin laughed thinly, without mirth. Sure, he remembered. That's what Big Bill had been trying to tell him—how fast shooting was merely a matter of perfect co-ordination between a man's head and his hand—and the flexibility of his right wrist.

But remembering that now didn't give him any courage. How could it? He hadn't handled a gun for months until he'd picked up the Peacemaker a few minutes ago. And he couldn't forget how strange the the gun had felt. It would feel even more strange when he drew it against Buck Yardley, knowing that his own life depended on how fast he fired it, knowing he wouldn't be fast enough!

"Yes, I remember all right," he said, and turned down the stairs.

But Gail's hand, tugging at his sleeve, stopped him. "Big Bill won't be the only one waiting for you, Lee. I'll be waiting, too."

It came to him then that this girl expected him to come back. She didn't realize that he was merely making a gesture, a final, foolhardy gesture for a grand old man who couldn't live and wouldn't die. She thought he was going to kill Buck Yardley.

His mind was struggling with the bafflement of that when Gail kissed him. "For luck, Lee," she said, and went abruptly back into Big Bill's room.

Lee Harlequin went down the stairs, the sense of Gail's kiss strangely merged with the uncomfortable weight of the gun-sagged holster at his side. Guns and girls! What a hell of a combination for a coward!

Peg-leg O'Shea was in the lobby. "Ye goin' after Buck Yardley?" he asked in a surprised voice.

Lee nodded.

"Wait till I git me gun, lad," the old Irishman blurted. "I'll keep them other spalpeens from hamstringin' ye!"

But Lee shook his head. "Yardley won't need any help," he said flatly. "And neither will I."

He was thinking about that as he plodded through Main Street's deep dust, noticing how the saloon's lamplight made a wide yellow pattern against the night's quilted blackness.

Yellow! That's what he was—yellow as the dust under his feet. Even this thing of facing Buck Yardley was the gutless gesture of a chicken-hearted coward who couldn't endure watching a brave man die. He reached the opposite sidewalk, heard the loud talk of drunken men above the noisy jangle of a piano. In another few seconds he would be inside, facing Buck Yardley's gun!

Abruptly then, cold fingers of fear formed an icy knot inside Lee Harlequin. Nauseating dread made the muscles of his stomach crawl, and the sharp talons of his mind sought frantically for some source of escape. He tried to tell himself that Big Bill wouldn't expect this play, if he knew his son had failed to follow his advice about keeping in practice. But it was too late to explain that now. Big Bill wouldn't understand it.

He pushed through the batwings, smelled the rank odor of sweat and

smoke and stale whiskey, saw the shifting shapes of miners and cowpunchers dancing with painted girls in tinseled gowns. Squinting his eyes against the glare of high-hung chandeliers, Harlequin stared at the half dozen men loitering at the long bar. Almost at once he spotted Tex Fagan. But Buck Yardley wasn't there. He wasn't at the poker table —nor at the roulette wheel.

Buck Yardley wasn't here!

A GUSTY sigh of relief slid through Lee Harlequin's tight lips. He'd tried to do what Big Bill wanted. It wasn't his fault if he couldn't find Yardley. He sent a darting glance at the clock above the bar, saw that it was just midnight. There was an eastbound train at 12:10 a. m. If he hurried to the station—

He was turning to the doorway when Tex Fagan's voice halted him. "You lookin' for someone?" the saloon owner asked, his startled eyes staring at the marshal's badge.

For a fleeting instant Lee wanted to say, "No." But he knew a denial was useless. Tex Fagan had already seen the badge, and the gun.

So he said: "I'm looking for Buck Yardley."

The saloonkeeper's eyes showed a continued puzzlement. "He'll be back directly. Want me to tell him you'll be back, too?"

Lee nodded and turned through the batwings. When he reached the street he saw Peg-leg O'Shea on the hotel steps, and three faces dimly outlined in the window of Big Bill's room. That would be Gail, her father and Doc Cavanaugh. They'd think he was still searching for Buck Yardley, that this unhurried stroll along Main Street was his way of waiting for Yardley to show up. He heard a train's distant whistle, knew that he had plenty of time. And he tried vainly to ignore the flood of self-disgust that rose like a muddy wave inside him.

Leisurely, as a man with no particular destination in mind, Lee turned down Depot Alley. When he sauntered past the station he glanced through the side window where a telegraph operator was busily dispatching a train order. Harlequin stood there a moment, unconsciously reading the Morse signals, watching the way the man's right wrist made a flexible arc as his fingers gripped the key. The thought came to Lee that he, too, had done this same thing, hour after hour, for a whole year—

Then, suddenly, sharply, he remembered Big Bill's explanation of fast gun work—co-ordination be-

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tween your hand and your head and *the flexibility of your right wrist.* That was exactly what a telegraph operator needed to work a wire! That was what Gail had tried to tell him when she said: "Big Bill meant it for gun work, but you used it for something else."

Of course, he had used it, day in and day out. He recalled now how his wrist had ached during the first few days, how the train dispatcher had told him that was just the kinks coming out, that soon his wrist muscles and tendons would be strong and flexible as saber steel!

Maybe his wrist hadn't lost its snap after all. Maybe he could still draw a gun like a marshal's son should.

The train rolled in, came to a grinding stop. But Lee Harlequin didn't even notice it. He was watching the way his right hand flicked down and up, with the heavy Peacemaker. And he was smiling.

LEE HARLEQUIN'S return to Main Street was quiet—like the false hush before a storm. The eyes that watched him from the hotel window and the Ace High Saloon stoop saw no change in him. He looked exactly the same as when he'd walked down this street ten minutes ago—a tall, bare-headed young man with a star on his shirt and a gun at his side. Those watchers couldn't know how he had changed inside.

But Lee Harlequin knew. And that knowledge was like nothing he had ever known before. It was as if some overwhelming weight had been abruptly lifted from his shoulders; it was a warming glow that melted the icy knot at the pit of his stomach. It was courage!

Yet even then, with the last ragged remnant of the old fear magically dissolved, Lee Harlequin's lips still held their self-mocking smile. This methodical march toward the saloon wasn't the gutless gesture of a coward trying to die like a man. It was a desperate attempt to *live* like a man.

Buck Yardley stood waiting on the Ace High stoop with Tex Fagan. Lee was aware, without shifting his gaze, that Peg-leg O'Shea had stepped down to the opposite sidewalk. And there was something else different; this street was strangely silent. The saloon piano had stopped its monotonous jangle, and all sound of hilarity had ceased in Fagan's palace of pleasure.

When Lee was within fifty feet of the saloon, Buck Yardley called: "You looking for me, mister?"

Lee took another three steps, deliberately cutting down the distance between them, for he wanted to be close enough to kill Buck Yardley with one fast shot. He saw Fagan back away from Yardley, moving in a manner that would give each man plenty of elbow room.

"What you doing with that star on your chest, key rattler?" Yardley called tauntingly. "You figuring to be chief operator of Arizona Pacific?"

"I'm keeping it clean," Harlequin said quietly and kept on walking.

Yardley chuckled. But the effort sounded a little forced. He said warily: "If you're looking for me you're close enough."

Lee Harlequin halted. "I can see you fine, Buck," he said quietly. "And you look like a stinking, backstabbing son!"

Whereupon Buck Yardley did the only thing left to do. He grabbed for his gun. Lee saw the beginning of that draw, and laughed a little, deep inside him. This crooked mayor was no speed merchant at all.

Or else he was overly confident. His draw seemed almost clumsy!

Lee's own hand dipped down and up with the flexible snap of a whip —a swift symphony of motion so incredibly fast that the Peacemaker's firing seemed deliberately delayed. Yet that first slug had already sliced through the breast pocket of Buck Yardley's fancy vest when the mayor's gun exploded.

THOSE two shots were like a signal heralding the bullet bedlam that instantly followed. Lee Harlequin took two quick steps sideways. He saw Tex Fagan's rat face in the flash of an exploding gun a split second before he felt the shock of a bullet burning its way through the muscles of his right arm. And knew instantly that he was doomed—

Yet even then, with the sure knowledge that he wouldn't survive that yonderly gun, Lee Harlequin shifted the dangling Peacemaker to his left hand. Another slug slashed the flesh along his ribs in a way that made him wince, momentarily closing his eyes. When he opened them he stared through swirling streamers of gun smoke, seeking vainly for sight of a target.

For one crazy instant, between seeing and believing, Lee thought something had happened to his eyes —until he glimpsed the two motionless forms sprawled on the saloon stoop. Then sheer amazement gripped him. He had fired but one shot!

But that puzzle was soon solved when Peg-leg O'Shea shouted gleefully: "We got 'em both, be jabbers!"

Lee turned toward the hotel, saw the old Irishman standing on the sidewalk with a smoking gun in his hand. So that was why he was still alive, he thought, watching Gail Shannon run toward him, hearing her glad voice call, "Lee!" over and over. He was alive because a loyal old son of Erin had ignored a coward's denial of the need for help.

Almost at once then, Lee Harlequin was holding Gail Shannon in his good left arm, and receiving a different kind of kiss than she had ever given him before. And feeling a peculiar thrill when she cried: "Lee—you're hurt!"

"Not much," he scoffed, then asked soberly: "Is dad still alive?"

Gail looked up at him, her warm eyes shining with unshed tears. "Big Bill died ten minutes ago, just after you came back from the depot. He had a smile on his face, Lee—as though he knew you were going to keep your promise."

Lee Harlequin glanced gravely down at the law badge on his coat. "This star was Big Bill's religion," he muttered. "He was a real man."

"Yes," Gail said gently. "And so is his son! Big Bill never had any doubt of that—and neither did I."

THE END.

★ ★

Caught between vengeful lumberjacks and ruthless timber barons, Ben McCracken was hemmed in by hate and driven by treachery on

THE TRAIL OF ROARING RIVERS

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WHEN RAMBLIN' DAYS ARE OVER

BY HARRY R. KELLER

Bronc, we've made our pile at last;
  Ramblin' days are over,
Toil and hardships all are past;
  You can live in clover.
Me, I'll pick some quiet town,
  Calm and cool and breezy;
Dump my pack and settle down,
  Start to take life easy.

Hard to meet the mountains' test;
  You and I have learned it.
Now we'll settle down to rest—
  Reckon we have earned it.
No more hunger trails to blaze,
  No more painful schemin',
Loafin' through the lazy days,
  Drowsylike, and dreamin'.

Still . . . the mountains mark their man,
  Brand him past denyin'.
Wonder if we'll find the plan
  Wholly satisfyin'.
Village lane or city street,
  Deathly still or brawlin'—
Can they calm our itchin' feet
  When the hills are callin'?

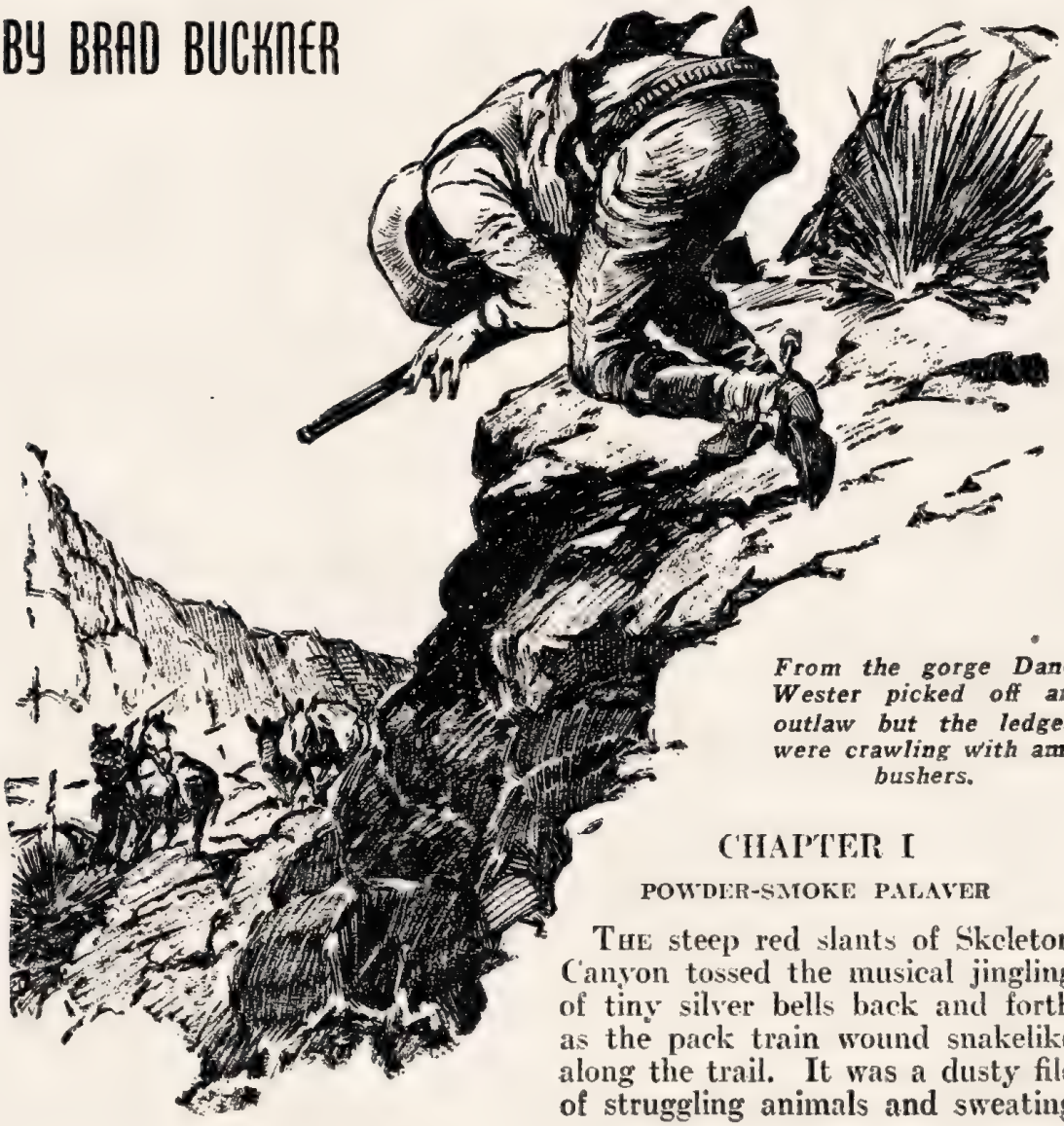
Up among the jumbled peaks
  Timber wolves are howlin',
Down along the tumblin' creeks
  Bears and panthers prowlin'.
You and I are kin to these;
  Eagles are our brothers.
Comfort and a life of ease—
  Leave that to the others!

Where the windin' trails unfold
  Through the mountain passes,
There is waitin' brighter gold,
  Sweeter, greener grasses.
Down the range's rugged slope
  Teasin' winds are blowin',
Bringin' back the old, old hope—
  Broncho, let's get goin'!

Gun Ghosts OF SKELETON CANYON

The men who rode with Dane Wester into Skeleton Canyon knew all the perils of that uncurried strip of hell but they dared a merciless gun-spiked death trap for a long-awaited chance of vengeance

BY BRAD BUCKNER



From the gorge Dane Wester picked off an outlaw but the ledges were crawling with ambushers.

CHAPTER I

POWDER-SMOKE PALAVER

THE steep red slants of Skeleton Canyon tossed the musical jingling of tiny silver bells back and forth as the pack train wound snakelike along the trail. It was a dusty file of struggling animals and sweating

men, stretching out in a weaving hundred-yard line.

Each laden animal had its little bell tied about its neck, the jack itself almost hidden beneath the huge packs bulging from its sides. Packers and guards ranged along the laboring line. The swarthy faces of the Mexicans were hard and bitter, their alert, dark eyes never still. Near every brown hand the walnut stock of a rifle jutted from its saddle boot, or the butts of worn pistols pronged out from tied-down holsters. Nerves were raw and jumpy with the threat that lurked behind each boulder or bend in the canyon trail.

These men were not forgetting that sudden and violent things happened to pack trains here in this uncurried strip of hell. Somewhere ahead the whitening bones of nineteen of their friends lay among the willows of the creek bosque.

The face of one man was in decided contrast to the swart visages of the others. Dane Wester, the only American in the group, looked optimistic and anticipative. His light-brown eyes studied the winding trail ahead as though expecting it momentarily to widen out into the fertile stretches of the San Simon, and his slab-muscled body was relaxed in the saddle. The muscle-padding of his blocky shoulders bulged under the plaid shirt. His corded neck was sunburned from the hot, semitropical sun.

Dane reached forward to lay a friendly slap against the withers of his mount. " 'Pears like they heard you was coming, Chico," he said to the wiry little Mexican beside him on the trail. "Old Man Clanton won't be within a hundred miles o' Hell's Kitchen if he knows Chico Morales is ridin' through."

"I weel find him," the Mexican spoke with quiet resolution. "Five years I 'ave planned thees. When I ride back to Sonora, my brothers weel rest in peace. Besides—I cannot fail, when I 'ave bought every candle in the church an' had it lighted for me an' my *doradoes!*" Determination flowed into the face of the young Castilian. The dark eyes were burning with purpose. But all of his vengeance-filled looks could not hide the aristocratic cut of his face. His fine lips were indicative of high-ranking Spanish blood. His thin nose and high cheekbones showed a discerning, cultured side of his nature that few men who had shuddered at the exploits of Chico Morales would have suspected.

The young smuggler was a colorful figure in his scarlet velvet pantaloons and silver-spangled vest. He wore a huge sombrero of unborn burro skin that completely shaded his shoulders. Half of his slender figure was hidden by the gaudy serape flung across his shoulders with careless grace.

DANE twisted to sweep the mule train with a glance that penetrated through swirling clouds of reddish dust. His deep chest expanded with a breath of satisfaction. It was a rich cavalcade he had brought up through the Animas of New Mexico into the Peloncillos—and every cent of it was his. Five hard years of cattle raising and trading in Mexico had given him a stake with which he could buy the best spread in southeastern Arizona, in his home country.

Those years had been galling, back-breaking ones for a green kid who had thought it the easiest thing in the world to round up a few loose cows and sell them for enough to buy white faces or Brahmas. But he had not quit when he found how

hard it was going to be. He had stuck. And now, within a few miles of home, he was bringing back the fruits of his toil—two thousand Mexican dobe dollars in the saddlebags, a string of clean-limbed Andalusian burros, and enough trading goods to set him up in a lush San Simon spread.

What was more, he was home. That thought sent the blood pumping eagerly through his veins. Home—and his kid brother, Jim. Jim Wester would be twenty-one now, four years younger than Dane. Jim had been a gangling, red-headed kid of sixteen when Dane pulled his freight for Mexico. It had been like pulling teeth to leave Jim with their uncle, both parents being dead, and ride away, but Dane was farsighted enough to know it would be best in the long run. Now his eyes sparkled at the knowledge that a few hours would bring the two of them together again.

The twisting, rocky bends of Skeleton Canyon slowly unraveled before the pack train as the sun mounted higher. The brazen, scorching ball of fire burned down on the back of Dane's neck and brought perspiration out all over his corded body. Only the small stream that sparkled through the sparse willows and blackjack relieved the parched dryness of the setting. The pungent coolness of it was balm to the men of the pack train.

An emotion that was far removed from his eagerness to see Jim and settle down, roweled Dane as he darted a sidelong glance at Chico Morales. The young Mexican was impassive of expression, but one who knew his history would have understood the haunting sadness that turned his fine lips down at the corners and gave his dark eyes a brooding look.

It was the death of his own three brothers that had turned Chico from a respectable life to one of outlawry. Five years now they had lain unburied—and the place they lay moldering was in this very gorge. The four young brothers had ridden with their uncle on a smuggling expedition to Tucson, as many an otherwise respectable Mexican sometimes did when drought gaunted his cattle and seared his land. But that train of twenty men and twice as many burros never reached its goal. For in Hell's Kitchen they had been ambushed by the notorious Old Man Clanton and his cutthroat gang. Of the twenty carefree men who rode along dreaming of the gay *baile* that lay ahead of them at Tucson, only one escaped the death that poured down with horrible abruptness from the rocks. And that one man had dragged himself off to live from that day on with the sole thought of returning to wipe out the atrocity in kind.

Chico Morales was riding for that purpose now. But Dane had stipulated when he hired the *doradoes* to help him bring the train in, that nothing beyond the pale of the law was to take place while they were in his hire. His goods were all duty paid at the border. He sympathized with young Morales and hoped he would find the Clanton gang in their haunts about Tombstone and Galeyville, but while they were with him he had extracted their promise to keep on the right side of the law. And he knew Chico well enough to know nothing would make him break that word.

NOW they broke around a bend and the train filed into the wider portion of the canyon that was Hell's Kitchen. Among trees and giant boulders, around many an outcrop-

ping of towering precipices, they made their way. As they passed into the coolness of tall cathedral rocks, shady and quiet, Dane suddenly reined down and extended a hand to stop Chico.

"Hold it!" he clipped. Then, to the solitary horseman who lounged in the shadow of a slanting slab of granite, he called: "Howdy, mister." His body tensed forward in the saddle as he appraised the lone rider.

As though word had been telegraphed down the entire line, the twelve outriders spurred to the front. Their faces were dark and suspicious. Chico laid his thin brown hand on the stock of his saddle gun. His eyes were hard. His whole, slender body became tense.

The slim young rider ahead of them nodded and said: "Howdy." His brown eyes flicked up and down the line of mules. He was of average height and build and wore a plaid shirt, with leather chaps over his Levis. He threw one leg over the pommel of his saddle and pushed back his flat-crowned range hat. Crisp, sandy hair spilled over his forehead.

"Looks like you've come quite a piece," he commented.

Dane's brow notched in puzzled contemplation of the youngster. He said slowly, "From Sonora. Long enough this time of the year." Memory jabbed at him, telling him there was something familiar about the freckled face. All at once a warm glow broke into a grin. This was Jim! And he hadn't known him for half a minute!

But no wonder the kid had seemed like a stranger at first. He was lean and much taller, and he looked as tough and seasoned as rawhide. His red hair was sandy-looking, now, his blue eyes paler in contrast with bronzed skin. Dane held his breath, waiting for the boy to recognize him. But after a moment's scrutiny, Jim's gaze wandered past him down the line of mules.

"What's the matter with me?" Dane asked himself. "Have I changed that much?"

Presently Jim spoke. Hesitantly, as though nervous. "You look—purty well loaded down," he faltered, not meeting Dane's eager eyes.

It was on the tip of Dane's tongue to blurt out his identity when Chico's measured words cut through the silence piling up between them. The little Mexican shrugged his slim shoulders as he intoned: "Perhaps el Americano is better be moving on. We have business—you have business. The parting weel be easy."

Dane Wester laid a reassuring hand on Chico's wiry forearm. He swept off his big sombrero, exposing his face and light-brown hair to Jim's view without the obstruction of the wide brim.

"Jim, you doggoned young fool!" he laughed. "Don't you know me? It's Dane—your brother!"

The boy jerked erect in the saddle as though bushwhacker lead had drilled his spine. His eyes widened and his face went white. Then, before Dane could put a hand to stop him, Jim sank the spurs to his dun and wheeled, dodging among the boulders as he shot up the canyon.

Before the dazed group of men could recover from their surprise, a voice sheered through the peace of the canyon with an order that struck terror to every man's heart: "Give them the works, boys!" While the echoes of the cry still rung in the air, a crash of gunfire rocked the very walls of the canyon. They had been ambushed!

CHAPTER II

THE CAVE

SHOCK and horror froze Dane Wester for a long second. He shuddered involuntarily as his eyes swept the giant boulders above them. Among the rocks and tangled chaparral, steeped a moment before in wilderness stillness, ambushing outlaws rose against the sky. Through drifting blue veils of smoke they loomed like phantom demons, pumping lead from their rifles with the steadiness of death machines. Beside Dane a Mexican screamed and threw his hands aloft, to plummet to the ground beneath his horse's hoofs.

The motion wrenched Dane from the spell that gripped him. Hatred fanged into his brain as he sprang from the saddle to hunker behind his mount, using it as a shield. His guns were out, pounding against his hands as he fired at the flashes. Rolling gun thunder from the slab-rock ledges above filled the whole gorge with sound.

Dane was cold with horror as he fired and cocked, fired and cocked. With a sickening sense of futility he fought the death that had leaped upon them as a mountain lion leaps upon its prey. Gradually an idea crept into his numbed mind. He shuddered with its import. Jim Wester—his brother—had given the signal for the slaughter! He had been here as a stake-out man for an outlaw gang, perhaps the same gang that had slaughtered Chico's brothers and friends five years before. As certainty came to Dane, bitter hatred flowed into his body, searing him like an incandescent flame.

A bullet snagged through his shoulder muscles, but its power was unheeded. Dane threw down on the red-bearded face peering over the rock from which the shot had come. Even as his gun roared, a shrill scream lifted from behind the shelter and the renegade came toppling down the rocks.

Behind him Dane heard the screams of wounded Mexicans, the squealing of mules as they lay kicking on the ground in the throes of death. The raking fire was cutting them down as a prairie fire levels dry mesquite. Dane lurched aside, forsaking the shelter of his horse, as he caught a glimpse of a score of frantic mules bearing down on him in their insane impulse to gain shelter. He barely avoided the charge of their chuffing hoofs as they swept by. The clashing of their silver bells was a pathetic accompaniment of the song of death echoing between the rocky slants of the canyon.

Chico Morales was everywhere,

Darting from rock to rock, he triggered with dread accuracy at the bushwhackers. His magnificent sombrero lay in the trail, cut to ribbons by the hoofs of the mules. The serape he wore was blotched with scarlet from a half dozen wounds in his body, yet he shrieked orders in a strong, clear voice, striving to marshal his forces against the withering death. But it was a hopeless fight. Of his ten men, only three were still on their feet. The others lay writhing in the dirt or drifting slowly down the stream, reddened now with their blood.

And still the rifles spat angry lead at the helpless mule train. The very walls of the gorge seemed to bristle with flashes. Dane Wester leaned

Rattlesnake Bill had everything his own way until suddenly a knife appeared under his chin and a voice purred, "Drop your guns, señor, or I shall slit your throat."

against a boulder and notched back the hammer of his gun. He sought for some bit of clothing, or some glimpse of a man's face, to trigger at, but behind the drifting veil of blue powder smoke the dry gulchers were well hidden. Dane's lips tightened against his teeth as a second shot tore into his thigh. His guns were hot and smoking in his hands as he fought on grimly. Acrid smoke stung his nostrils, brought tears into his eyes.

Panting, Dane glanced along the shattered line of Mexicans. His vision was blurred from the weakness that threatened to drag him down, but even so he made out enough to bring a sob to his blood-flecked lips. Of the eleven Mexicans, only one was alive—Chico Morales. The others lay in the swirling dust, their bodies twitching as bushwhacker lead continued to devil them. The spunky little *dorado* leader was staggering around in circles, clutching at his belly. His red pantaloons were no redder than the white shirt where his lifeblood had stained it.

And all of a sudden Chico, too, was down. He went flat on his face, then managed to push himself up for a second while he searched the smoke-clouded scene for something. His eyes fastened on Dane and he waved a hand weakly. "*Adios, amigo mio!*" he muttered. Then he lay still.

HALF insane with grief and agony, Dane sprang into the trail. Ahead of him men were piling down the rocky slope. Bloodthirsty shouts crowded their lips.

The faces of three of the men were burned into Dane's memory forever. One of them was small but stocky, with a red face and a flat hat turned up off the face. He was yelling something as he came on, exposing two missing front teeth. Another man was tall, and spare as a hunting hound, with a sandy gray mustache. He had a huge nose that hung over his slash mouth like a vulture's beak.

The third renegade brought a choking curse to Dane's throat. His body was massive, his shoulders only slightly stooped. But his face was the bearded face of an old man—a full beard as white as snow, hard wrinkled cheeks tanned as yellow as saddle leather by the winds and suns of years, blue eyes blazing fiercely. This was Old Man Clanton, the most vicious and bloodthirsty outlaw in the Southwest. The man who had murdered Chico's brothers and his friends. The man Chico had sworn to kill.

That thought whipped Dane like a barbed lash. The renegade had triumphed again. And he had triumphed because of the treachery of Dane's brother! As the awful force of that seared into Dane's consciousness, he resolved to live long enough to even things up, to catch up with Jim and make him pay for the horrible thing he had done. But he could not do it by staying here and being shot to doll rags. He must escape!

With the speed of thought he sprang into the brush and seized the bridle of a spooked horse. He dragged himself into the saddle and wheeled the animal, sinking spurs viciously into its quivering flanks. As he shot through the willows, a dozen shots ripped out, stinging the air about his head and plucking spurts of dust from the trail beyond him.

Pain grabbed at his side and he had to cling to the pommel to keep from sliding out of the saddle. The pain made waves of nausea surge through him, so that the canyon swam like heat devils. Through his

brain pounded one maddening thought. "This is Jim's work!" Behind him lay eleven fine men. Up and down the canyon were scattered all the money and mules and trading goods his five years' work had wrested from the dry Mexico soil. Every bit of the havoc was attributable to Jim Wester's stopping them while the Clanton gang drew beads on them.

Frantically Dane urged his horse up a side canyon that came into the Kitchen at this point. Sounds of pursuit were slow in coming. The dry-gulchers were impeded by the threshing bodies of dying mules and spooked animals that sprang here and there along the trail.

Minutes crawled by while Dane goaded his horse farther and farther into the sharp-fingered brush. The fever in his wounds had seeped all through his body. His face was beaded with sweat, his plaid shirt plastered to him with perspiration and blood. Stains spread ominously down his right leg clear into the half boot.

Suddenly the canyon splayed out and became less sheer. Up ahead Dane could see greenery and blue sky. He prodded the horse on with roweling spurs.

Lost in feverish determination to stick in the saddle, he was unaware of the rifle protruding from the brush directly ahead until he was almost upon it. Even then the set, bewhiskered face looming behind the sights was but a vague part of the brush. Dane tried to drag his gun from the holster, but his hands were too weak to budge it.

With unwavering stare, the oldster cracked out: "Whar's yore claim, feller? Or be yuh tryin' to jump mine?"

Dane muttered something through parched, blackened lips. Dimly he was aware of a short, wizened old man emerging from the manzanita bush. In the next moment everything went black and he was falling.

OUT of a black void Dane seemed to come spinning up. Things settled at last into a definite pattern. For the first time since he fell from horse there appeared to be solid ground beneath him instead of space. He opened his eyes and looked around him. He seemed to be in a cave. There was an iron stove in one corner and a table on the dirt floor.

The place was fixed up neatly, like a small cabin. Dane shoved himself up on one elbow and stared out the door, through which he could see a brushy section of hillside almost obscured in gloom. Whether it was dawn or dusk, he couldn't guess.

Someone came shuffling toward him, and an old voice crackled: "Thunderation, Sue! The boy's awake!" The man stopped by the coal-oil lamp and stared, pulling at his gray beard.

Dane Wester's eyes took inventory of the newcomer. He was short, not over five feet four. His ears were huge, and seemed to be used to support his weather-worn range hat. Iron-gray hair was chopped off crudely a little above the shoulders. His bright little eyes glowed in a mat of whiskers like polished onyx lying on wool. He wore a patched brown shirt and tattered Levis.

The oldster anticipated Dane's first question. "Two days!" he said brusquely. "Two days yuh been trying to get the devil to let yuh in."

Dane was staggered. But before he could speak, a girl's form seemed to materialize beside his cot and he was looking up into the bluest eyes he had ever seen. Sick as he was,

he feasted his eyes on her loveliness for a long moment.

Whether it was the light behind her that made her corn-tassel hair shine with a thousand glinting lights, Dane did not know, but his heart struck one wild beat as she smiled down at him. Her forehead and cheeks were deeply tanned, touched with delicate color along the ridge of the cheekbones. Her nose was finely chiseled, and her mouth curved richly in a faint smile. There was a smile, too, in the eyes that sparkled merrily.

"You're feeling better," she announced, without asking him.

Dane nodded. "I'm obliged to you, ma'am, an' you, old-timer, fer takin' care of me," he said. His voice surprised him with its weakness. "I'll be gettin' out soon's I can ride."

"You'll do nothing of the sort," the girl declared. "You'll stay right there until you're fit to move."

"If it's botherin' us yo're worryin' about," the oldster put in, "jest get it outa yore haid. Yo're welcome in Catastrophe Jones' diggin's long as you want tuh stay. Besides, Sue Painton here is the one that's carried the burden o' nursin' yuh."

DANE'S eyes warmed at their whole-hearted welcome. He lay back on the cot as a sudden feeling of tiredness came over him. "You're mighty generous, both o' you," he returned. "Silver-minin' folks, aren't you?"

"I sometimes wonder," Catastrophe snorted. "Ain't found but a Mexican chicken's crawful so fur, though me an' Sue's daddy been scratchin' 'round these hills for a y'ar. Old John—that's the gal's pappy—is down to Bisbee right now havin' some dirt assayed. They've got their place up the canyon."

Dane nodded and shifted his position. Instantly a sharp pain pinched his side, causing him to bite his lip against the impulse to cry out. And as the half-healed wound subsided its throbbing, a still worse pain seeped into his body. He could not repress a groan as remembrance swept him back to Skeleton Canyon. The horror that had rained from the rocks was nothing compared to the feelings that ran high in him at the memory of Jim's treachery. The brother he had hoped to make boss rider on his spread had made a different choice —to ride with outlaws instead of rannies, to skulk along dimly marked trails instead of the broad sweeps of prairie, to wield a shooting iron in place of a branding iron.

Brooding bitterness was in his eyes as he saw again the handsome, pain-racked face of little Chico Morales, forcing himself up long enough to wave farewell and bid him, "Adios!" There had died the gamest, squarest little Mexican who ever lived. And above him in the rocks Dane's own brother had stood and pumped shot after shot into Chico and his friends. Into Dane Wester's face then came a hard light. He resolved that the crime would not go unpunished even though his own brother was responsible. His lost spread was nothing; a debt of hate and treachery lay on his soul, and nothing but blood could write "Paid in Full" across it.

While Dane had been staring bitterly at the ceiling of the dugout, occupied with his thoughts, Sue Painton's fingers had been busy preparing supper. Now she came near him and set a plate redolent with steaming food beside him on a chair. "That'll bring back some of the energy you've lost in the last couple of days," she smiled. "Catastrophe's tall tales and plenty of good food are all you need."

"I don't know about the yarns, but I can shore put away some grub," Dane replied with new interest quickening his gaze.

The girl smiled at his words and turned to the old prospector. "I'll have to be getting back to the cabin," she announced. "I'll be down early in the morning in case you need anything." With a flashing smile at the boy, she left the little dugout.

A curious sense of disappointment made Dane stare regretfully after her. Her presence seemed to bring warmth and light into the granite-walled cave, and at her leaving it became again no more than a mine shaft.

When he had finished eating, he lay back and took a deep, satisfied breath. He could feel the new strength already surging into his battered body. It brought no lightening of mood, for it meant only that he would be sooner at his task than he had thought.

Dane's gaze swept about as Catastrophe scraped a chair up near his bed. He waited for him to speak, but for a moment there was only the sound of the oldster sucking on a corn-cob pipe to bring it to life. After a long moment, in which the glittering little eyes regarded him searchingly, the long-awaited questions came.

"I ain't simple enough to lay yore present plight to a fall from a hoss, boy," Jones said mildly. "A man don't come roarin' through the brush with a couple o' pounds o' lead in him fer fun, neither. But if it ain't none o' my business, jest say so."

Dane ran his eyes the length of the old-timer, and then shrugged. "You must be square or you wouldn't have taken the trouble to drag me in here," he summed up. "Here it is, then. I'm Dane Wester, an'—"

"Dane Wester!" Catastrophe Jones yelled. He sprang back out of his chair and the pipe hit the floor with a scattering of hot sparks. Anger flowed into his countenance. "Then I been nursin' a back-shootin' owlhooter fer two days! Nursin' one o' the sons that done my old pard, John Painton, outa his mine! By Jehoshaphat, I got a notion to let you have it right now!"

CHAPTER III

A GUN GHOST WALKS

DANE'S eyes snapped open in stunned incredulity at what he had heard. A tremor ran through his body. Was this old man joking? Was he crazy? It was impossible for Dane to credit his senses. He, the only survivor of the grim massacre, was being accused of being an outlaw himself! Half expecting the old man to grin suddenly at the success of his crude joke, Dane stared again at him. But there was only grim purpose in the weather-beaten visage, and in the clawing fingers splayed over the heel of a huge revolver.

At last he managed to ask: "What're you talkin' about, Catastrophe?"

"I'm talking about skunks like Dane an' Jim Wester that ride with renegades 'stead o' workin' fer their grub," the old man growled, coming closer to him.

Dane stiffened as his brother's name fell from the miner's lips. "Jim Wester!" he said hoarsely. "What about him?"

"What about *him?*" Catastrophe's voice was harsh. "Yuh mean, what about yoreself? Two of a kind, I say. Lyin', gut-shootin', thievin'—"

Dane flung his legs out of the cot and stood up, towering over the old man as he yanked him with a hand-

ful of shirt front. "Let's get this straight," he said flatly. "I'm Dane Wester, late of Sonora. For five years I've been workin' below the border to build up money for a spread. Three days ago I come home —to what? To an ambush in Skeleton Canyon, with my own brother leadin' the charge. An' now you got the gall to accuse me of bein' one of the dry-gulchers! Hang it, how could I be? Would I crawl off in the bushes to die if I was a pal of the Clantons? No, I'd 've stuck with 'em. You can understand that, can't yuh, jughead?"

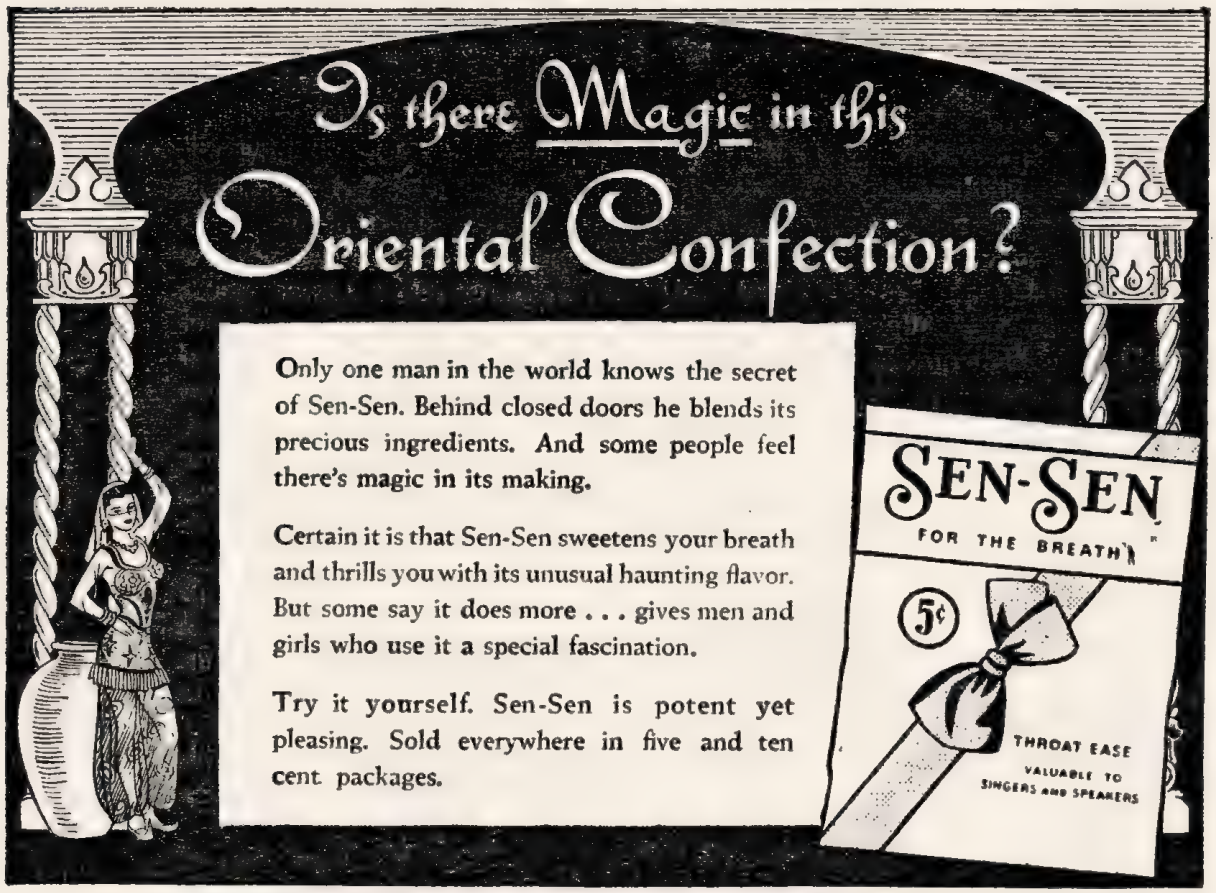
Catastrophe scratched his head, frowning. "Shucks," he muttered. "I never did think o' that. You . . . you tellin' me straight, boy? Ever'body hereabouts has heard tell of you ridin' with Old Man Clanton an' his tribe."

Dane sat down rather suddenly, because he was weaker than he had thought. "Tell me something," he said weakly. "Tell me the whole dirty story, if yuh know it." He sat staring at the old prospector from the depths of the mental fog he was in.

Catastrophe sized him up shrewdly. Into his old eyes came a kindly, understanding look. "I think mebbe yo're tellin' it straight," he opined. "Which bein' the case, there's things you ought to know."

"Go on," Dane said brusquely. "I'll listen."

"It's been goin' on for years," the old man began. "Old Man Clanton, Charlie Snow, an' Rattlesnake Bill have been hellions long as I kin remember. But six months ago they started in earnest. Thet was just before . . . before Jim Wester ji'ned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up with 'em. Old Man Clanton bought up a note from the bank on Sue's an' her daddy's mine back o' Tombstone. Well, they was set to pay it off, but the night afore it was due somebody broke into their house an' robbed 'em of the money they was gonna do it with. John Painton claims he seen the holdup man leavin'. It was Jim Wester."

"Jim Wester!" Dane's bronzed hand clenched on a wad of bedclothes. "Catastrophe, I'm hittin' the trail in the morning. Brother or no brother, Jim has a blood debt to pay me, as well as a debt in silver to the Paintons."

"I'd go a mite easy, boy," Catastrophe advised soberly. "I'm thinkin' another man's life makes a mighty poor pillow at night, 'specially when he's yore brother."

"A killer's a killer," Dane said harshly. But he was sick inside as he spoke.

The old hard-rock miner knocked the dottle out of his pipe and stuck it in his pocket. "You're grabbin' the brandin' iron by the hot end, boy," he said quietly. "Jest be shore thet it don't put the brand o' 'murderer' on the wrong man."

DANE was up and ready to leave by seven the next morning. His bruised and wounded body had begun to mend, though he was still weak. Only his splendid physique had brought him through the crisis.

As the two men lingered over second cups of the coffee Catastrophe had boiled up, a light step sounded in the entrance to the cave. Dane's head swung around and he saw Sue Painton framed in the doorway. Again a breathless feeling clutched at his chest as he looked at her, a feeling completely unfamiliar to him until he had seen her yesterday. But mingled with his admiration of the girl was a feeling of shame that he was brother to the man who had caused her and her father to lose their mine and had driven them back here into the hills to eke out a bare living.

Disappointment brought a frown to the girl's smooth forehead when she learned that her patient was leaving. Her smile was genuinely rueful as she shrugged, "Of course if you have to move on, we won't try to stop you, but I do wish you could stay until you're really well. Catastrophe and I will miss you. And just think—I don't even know your name!"

A feeling of tenseness piled up in the cave. Dane's glance flashed back to the miner. He read warning there—a plea not to reveal his identity. But he had entered this fight wholeheartedly, and he would not be ashamed of his colors before anyone. He swung his gaze back to the girl. For the fraction of a second he hesitated before he spoke. Then he said quietly: "Dane Wester's the name, ma'am."

Surprise flooded the girl's features. Then, swiftly, anger brought a high color to her cheeks, a flashing light into her eyes. "Dane Wester!" she gasped. "The . . . the brother of the man who ruined my father and broke him in health and spirit. And to think that I helped save you from the death you deserve!"

The words stung Dane like the lash of a bull whip. He winced as though he had been struck. "Ma'am," he said earnestly, "I swear I had nothin' to do with that. I've been in Mexico for five years. I never rode the owlhoot with anybody."

Scorn flashed in the girl's eyes. "A likely story," she said bitterly. "It's

clear to me now how you got shot up. You were in the party that robbed the pack train, not in the unfortunate victims' crew. I only wish I'd let you die without helping!"

With a toss of her head she turned and fled from the cave. Dane's fist balled with anger and he took a step after her. Then, abruptly he swung around, shrugging his shoulders. "As fair as a hand-picked jury. Well, I guess I can't blame her. Anyway, it ain't changin' my duties none. Thanks for your help, old-timer. I'll be pullin' out."

"Now, wait a minute, boy," Catastrophe stopped him. "I've had everything else happen to me—sold out a claim two days afore it came in rich, lost my supplies an' burro twenty miles back in the Mogollons in the middle of a blizzard, an' nigh onto ever'thin' else thet could happen—but I ain't yet rid' with a feller that had the brand o' 'owlhoot' stamped on him. Here an' now I aim to start. I got to go to Bisbee to load ol' John Painton on a hoss atter his three-day spree an' pack 'im home, so I'll pitch in with yuh, ifn that's where yo're headin'."

Dane grunted acceptance of the offer. He was glad to have company on the long ride, and especially a man who knew the trail as well as the oldster. Within five minutes they were forking leather and heading back down the canyon. But the young man's heart was leaden as they rode. He could not shake the feeling that back of him lay something that could have ripened into a new and fuller life for him, and that the blue eyes of Sue Painton had seen it, too. But he knew that what might have been was now finished. He was taking a trail this morning that would carry him forever from such a life.

CHAPTER IV

TRIGGER TALK

BISBEE sprawled in the late dusk with all the laziness of a peon flat on his back in the shade, sombrero over his face. Long shadows fell across the main street from the false-front stores, and in the shadows a number of horses stood sleepily at hitching racks. Already a few lights showed behind windows.

A sigh swelled Dane's chest as he stared mutely at the scenes where he and Jim had played as kids. How far away all that was now. Buried in time's discard, never to live again, even in memory.

He remembered the day Jim had said naïvely: "Some day I'm gonna be like Butch Cassidy, I am! I'm gonna take money away from the rich an' give it to the poor."

Dane had quashed that idea quickly. "Don't say a thing like that again," he warned the youngster. "Men like Cassidy build up fine reputations sometimes, because they do one or two good deeds. But behind the few good things they've done are a hundred sneaking acts an honest man would be ashamed of." Then he had grinned with swift, disarming good nature. "If you've got to be like somebody, what's the matter with Captain Hughes, of the Texas Rangers?"

And after that the little red-headed kid had worn a tin star on his shirt, instead of a mock-ferocious scowl. But in Jim Wester's heart, even in that long-gone time, there must have been festering a contempt for the law, and a secret admiration for man-killers and renegades.

But when his mind flashed ahead to the time when he would be face to face with Jim, meeting him in deadly combat, Dane knew Catastrophe was right; another man's life

never makes a soft pillow at night. For even before he had avenged the murders of his friends, Dane felt cold and hard inside, calloused somehow to any feeling but hatred.

He and Catastrophe split at the town's leading saloon. "I'll mosey down to the assayer's office an' see how Painton done," the oldster explained. "Then I'll look around 'til I find 'im an' try to sober him up enough fer the trip. Sense he lost his mine, he don't do much of anythin' but find excuses to come to town fer a spree. Last time he was four days raisin' Ned. This time I'm tryin' to cut him down to three!" With a chuckle he started down the boardwalk toward the assayer's office.

Dane twisted the barb deeper by recalling once more that it was Jim's fault that Painton had hit the down trail. Swallowing an oath, he smashed through the batwings into the saloon. The place was redolent of stale tobacco and cheap whiskey, jangling with the noise of a honka-tank girl trying to sing and the rattle of chips from gamblers. Dane squinted his eyes against the bite of smoke and the glare of early lamps and made out the outlines of the place. A long bar ran the length of the room on the left, lined with cowpokes and townsmen. To the right were gambling tables. In the rear was a piano.

Dane walked to the bar and ordered a drink. While he waited he turned around and glanced over the room. Just what he expected to find here he wasn't certain. All he knew was that somewhere he would hear a clue as to where he could find Old Man Clanton—and Jim. It occurred to him suddenly that Clanton, even though an outlaw, might not be in hiding. As the owner of a mine at Tombstone, he might be clear enough of the law to walk the streets of town freely. If that were true, there was no telling where Dane would run into the gang.

Bits of conversation filtered to him. Most of it was inconsequential. But suddenly he stiffened and his eyes became bleak as he overheard a man drawl: "Prob'ly Jim an' Dane Wester done it. The like o' them would do anything."

IT seemed to Dane that a white-hot flame had been played over him, that his pulses were quickened like a rolling drumbeat. His eyes sputtered fire as he lurched forward. He was on the point of spinning the man around when something occurred to bring his eyes swiveling around to the back of the room.

The man who had brushed by him on his way to the rear was tall and spare, with a huge beak of a nose over a slash mouth. He was one of the killers from Skeleton Canyon! Vengeance burned brightly in Dane's breast as he strode after the man. His whole body cried out to be jerking his guns and triggering into the renegade. The man was over six feet tall, with a thin build that did not fail to reveal the rawhide hardness of him. Lean hips were flanked by heavy six-guns and his big, red hands dangled near the weapons.

Even as Dane drew near him, the renegade stopped by a table at the rear where two men sat. His words slid into Dane's brain like a cold knife blade. "Painton's struck it rich!" The voice was low, but its tenseness made it carry. "The assayer says it runs twenty-five hundred to the ton!"

The two others looked startled. Then one of them hunched forward. "Jumpin' Jehoshaphat, Bill!" he gasped. "Better tell the Old Man. We'll keep an eye out." Rattlesnake

Dane was so hard hit he could barely crawl and from every side hidden gunmen lined their guns on him!

Bill lurched on past them down a short hall.

The situation roweled Dane like a spur. He hung motionless for a second. What was he to do? Shoot it out with these two men and probably get killed? Or try to reach Clanton and strike at the heart of the gang? He turned swiftly as he made his decision, and left the saloon.

In a few seconds he had reached the back of the place and was crouching against the rear door. Through it he could hear the sounds of excited voices. A deep, gruff voice snarled: "So you been stringin' us, dang you! Tellin' us there wasn't no pay dirt there an' then gettin' an assay of twenty-five hundred to the ton!"

A half-drunk, half-sick voice protested weakly. There was the solid slap of bone on flesh, and then the sound of a body striking the floor. Dane's temper boiled over at the mental picture of old John Painton, made drunk by the renegades to try to pry him loose from information, being heartlessly beaten. Before he knew what he was doing, he had lurched through the door, pulling at his guns.

The six men in the room jerked about as the door slammed back against the wall. White, startled faces flashed up before Dane's vision. Rattlesnake Bill was standing by a table with Old Man Clanton, the huge, white-bearded renegade leader. The fat, short man with the missing front teeth sat against the wall near the other door. Two other outlaws watched Dane with catlike eyes.

In the corner Dane made out the huddled shape of an elderly man,

white of hair and slender. His blood-smeared face, lax with alcohol stupor, still showed traces of refinement. The watery blue eyes quickened at sight of Dane's big figure.

"Now, you dirty, back-shooting sons," Dane gritted. "I've got all of you where I want you. All but that sin-festered brother of mine. I'm gonna fill you buzzards so full o' lead you can sink in yore own taller!" His long thumbs notched back the hammers of his .45s.

Old Man Clanton's face suddenly lost its startled look. "Feller," he said gruffly, "yuh got us wrong. This old gent is a pal of ourn. I picked him up off the street drunk an hour ago, an' I'm tryin' to help him sober up so's he can ride back an' protect his rights." The leathery visage took on a look of craftiness. The blue eyes blazed with what might have been friendliness, but obviously was not. "Ain't that right, Charlie?" he asked the fat man.

The man addressed, whom Dane now realized was Charlie Snow, nodded and grinned feebly.

"It's too late for talk," Dane said bleakly. "I've said you're goin' to boothill now. An' you can't talk your way out of it!" His fingers tightened on the curving triggers.

But the shots found no target except the worn planking of the floor. For at that moment a shadow passed over Dane's head and something arced down swifter than a diving bull bat. A solid thump marked the landing of a gun barrel on Dane's head. His guns roared, furrowing up long grooves in the floor. Then blackness closed around him like a tightening noose.

DANE was unconscious only a few minutes. He awoke as someone raised him roughly and planted him in a chair. His body was feverish with renewed pain, for the slugging, on top of his recent near murder, had done him no good. He slumped back, watching Rattlesnake Bill lower himself into a chair propped near the window.

Needles of pain pricked Dane's brain, but they were no worse than the knives of remorse that stabbed his heart. With vengeance almost in his grasp, he had failed. The chance to kill Clanton and the others and remove their terrorism forever had been his, and he had made a sorry botch of it.

A voice at his side brought his head swinging about slowly. John Painton said sadly: "You shouldn't have done it, boy. Takin' old men's parts in fights will never get you nothin' but trouble." But there was gratitude in his age-furrowed face.

"Quiet, you two," Rattlesnake Bill growled. He continued to pick his teeth with a split match, holding a gun on them with his left hand. After a moment he chuckled as if enjoying the situation. "Reckon by this time Clanton an' the others will be burnin' up the trail to yore mine, Painton. Looks like you jest can't hold on to nothin', don't it? Fust you lost yore Tombstone, an' now we're gonna see what kin be done about your new one." He grinned maliciously.

"You cowardly murderers!" Painton stormed. "What's in Clanton's filthy mind now?"

Bill shrugged. "Oh, nawthin' much. But it'll be too bad if that gal o' yours is in sight when he gets there. Wouldn't surprise me none if she got caught in a rock slide! An' mebbe they'll pick you up dead one of these nights from hittin' the bottle too hard—or a bottle hittin' you too hard!" His lean shoulders shook with coarse laughter.

Dane's head sang as though from

a physical blow. In a rush of anger and horror he sprang from the chair. "Even Clanton couldn't do a thing like that!" he gasped. He swayed drunkenly, sick with the very thought of Sue's danger. The room seemed to swim before his gaze. Then, as it cleared, he sprang forward.

"Jest hold it, now!" Rattlesnake Bill clipped, training the gun on Dane's midriff.

Dane held it—but not because of the warning. A hand had been inching through the window—a hand that gripped a knife. Now the knife was suddenly laid across the outlaw's skinny neck. A voice breathed tensely: "Drop your guns, señor. Or else I shall slit your throat."

The renegade almost gagged with terror. His guns thumped on the floor. In a flash a slender, blood-caked figure crawled through the window and picked up the dropped weapons.

Dane was at his side in a single bound. "Chico!" he cried. "But—I saw you killed!" His eager eyes searched the Mexican's face. It was a much different Chico Morales who stood before him, a man pale with sickness, dirty and bloody, his left arm dangling uselessly.

"Not dead, my frien'," Chico smiled wanly. "I dragged myself to the creek after they left, an' somehow, I am here." He jerked his head at the window. "There are horses. Your friend, Catastrophe, waits with them. You and the other señores wait for me. I weel not be long."

Dane read the meaning in his eyes. Without a word he helped John Painton through the window and climbed after him, with the outlaw's guns in his holster, now.

Outside they found Catastrophe Jones. The oldster was surprised and relieved to find the young man still alive. "Beats all how you kin brace a pack o' rattlesnakes ever' day an' get so few scratches!" he said, shaking his head. "But there's more trouble ahead of us than behind, this time, I'm thinkin'. Clanton's got a fifteen-minute start on us."

Impatient to be off, Dane swung into the saddle and waited for Chico. His body was tight with anxiety as he reflected on the fate that hovered over Sue Painton. Unless he could reach her before Clanton and his gun wolves did, the girl would be a sacrifice to their greed. Dane's mind flinched from the very thought of it, and for the first time, he knew he was in love. How hopeless a love it was, he did not have to remind himself.

Brother to the man who had impoverished her father and was even now lurking somewhere to join Clanton, he would render himself still less desirable in Sue's eyes by making himself a killer, as he was bound to do before another day passed. The trail that lay before him was a lonely one, a road that only bleak-eyed men can travel, and then always alone.

Now Chico Morales slid from the darkness. His right hand was red with something sticky and warm as he wiped it on the wreck of his fine velvet pantaloons and sheathed his knife. "Ees feenished," he declared cryptically. "Wan of my poor friends has been avenge'."

With a nod, Dane added: "An' it's only the beginning. We're takin' them gut-shootin' devils to boothill if we have to go along to escort 'em!" Sinking the spurs into his mount's flanks, he dashed into the road. Within a second's time, the other three men galloped in behind him.

One thought blotted out every other in Dane's mind as he crouched over the neck of his horse and tore

through the early darkness—to reach the girl before the Clanton gang did. But it was a hard trail that stretched before him, and one in which death lurked at every turn.

CHAPTER V

RED ROAD OF VENGEANCE

ALL night the rough trails from Bisbee, over the Pedregosas into the Guadalupes, rang to the metallic clatter of their mounts' shoes as they goaded them on into the hills. The black, moonless night was fraught with danger as much because of treacherous, sliding slopes as the bullet death that might snatch them at any point. For Dane the trip was unending agony of anxiety.

He shuddered as he realized the ghastly fate that hung over Sue. His mind conjured up visions of her as he had first seen her in the cave, smiling at him while the coal-oil lamp made a golden halo of the soft, wavy hair that fell about her shoulders. Then he remembered her as he had last seen her, her face flashing with anger as she learned that he was blood brother to the man who had ruined her father! What would she think now, if he was too late? Would her suspicions tell her that he had ridden away to call the renegades onto her, to take away all that she and her father had left? A groan passed Dane's lips at the thought of her going to her death believing that he was the perpetrator of the cowardly attack.

The little outlaw who rode beside him was equally grim and silent. Dane's heart went out to him in the understanding of what he must have suffered. He had lost all of his brothers, all of his comrades, by the greed of the Clanton gang. Chico looked bad, Dane thought, sizing the Mexican up in a sidelong glance. His face was pale, his hands clawlike. Several times Dane saw him clinging to the pommel of the saddle for support as he grew suddenly weak. An apprehension for his friend gripped Wester; it was obvious that Chico was living on nerve and hate alone. Nothing but a fire of revenge that burned brightly within him kept him going.

Before the sun had quite tipped the sawtooth ridge of the Peloncillos, Catastrophe called a halt. He gestured off to the right, through the sparsely timbered slopes. "We'll hit off thisaway," he announced. "The ridin' will be plenty tough, but it's five miles shorter. I reckon it's our only chance to stop 'em."

Wordlessly the three followed him. New hope kept Dane's cord-muscled body hunched slightly forward in the saddle. For another hour they picked their way up sliding talus and slid down precipitous slopes, until suddenly the sun burst over the skyline and brought warmth to their chilled fingers.

Without warning they rounded a rocky abutment into a wide canyon, brush and boulder filled. Catastrophe blew out a sigh of relief. "Thar she stands!" he told them. "The cabin's deserted, so I reckon we done it!"

Dane's eyes swept the scene hurriedly. Against the hillside was stuck a peculiar little cabin that seemed to disappear into the hills. The Painton place consisted of little more than a front room adjoining the mine shaft, arranged thus for convenience.

IN a flash the whole party dismounted and rushed up the path to the cabin. As their boots scraped in the scrabble of the hillside, a girl's face appeared in the window. And

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TRIMMED EDGES ALL AROUND ★

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suddenly Sue stood in the doorway. Her eyes became misty with relief and joy as she embraced her father. Then she saw Dane and her hand went to her throat.

Dane was puzzled. Her face did not show anger, as he had expected —only fear. A nameless fear that Dane could not understand. While he was still studying her expression, John Painton gestured with a sweep of arm, and called to them: "I reckon yuh've all earned a cup o' coffee, boys. Come on in."

Sue uttered a little cry of protestation, but it was too late. Following Catastrophe, Dane entered the cabin. In the next moment his face darkened like thunder as he stared at the red-headed young man who stood in the corner.

Jim Wester looked weak and sick, but he stood erect and unflinching before his brother's angry stare. One arm was bandaged and limp and his face was so white that the freckles stood out darkly. Around his forehead was another bloodstained bandage. Beneath it his blue eyes stared fearlessly at his brother.

Dane eyed him steadily, bitterness in his glance. "I swore I'd kill you for what you did, Jim," he ground out. "Even your death can't square things completely. You've got guns; you're gettin' your chance to draw. I'll give you the breaks you didn't give me and my friends. *Now draw!*" He shouted the last words, his whole body rebelling against the awful task before him. His mind was too filled with fury even to wonder at Jim's presence here.

Abruptly Sue darted between the two. She seized Dane's guns and tried to wrest them from the holsters. "Dane!" she screamed. "It wasn't Jim's fault—"

Wester's blocky shoulders moved a little as he twisted the guns effortlessly from the girl's grasp. "Keep outta this," he said warningly. "No woman can save him now." But something in Sue's voice and eyes had touched him. He felt a queer breathlessness. Behind the cold hate with which his mind was chilled, there flickered a feeble flame of caution.

Sue stepped back and regarded him contemptuously. "Are you as crazy as you act, Dane Wester?" she flung at him. "Look at Jim's arm—at his head. You don't think he shot himself, do you?"

Small, puzzled lines pinched the bridge of Dane's nose. He darted a look at his brother's bandaged arm and head.

Before he could speak, the girl was talking again in a rush of words: "Didn't you notice that he wasn't armed when he rode up to your mule train?"

Dane's jaw went slack as the full import of her words struck him with the shocking power of ice water. It seemed that her voice was coming from a distance.

"Jim was lucky to get away from Clanton's gang alive. He only came to the cabin here an hour ago, almost dead, as you can see. They shot him after the Skeleton Canyon massacre and left him for dead. He managed to drag himself away and hadn't eaten until I just fed him!"

"But—you were their stake-out man," Dane faltered, his eyes probing Jim's.

"Sure," the boy said bitterly. "A stake-out man with a six-gun trained on his back. I didn't have a gun, even, and if I'd tried to warn you they'd just have cut loose all the quicker."

Dane licked his lips, felt himself trembling. The complete unexpectedness of finding Jim here, of the

things they were telling him, seemed to have taken all power to reason from him. As though he were a figure in a dream, he mumbled: "Go on."

IT was my fault that they ever got a hold on me," Jim continued, his voice bleak. "Partly my fault, at least. I was in the Oriental at Tombstone one day, having a drink, when Old Man Clanton came up and asked if I wanted to make some money. I knew the kind of a polecat he was, so I told him no. While I was talking to him, Rattlesnake Bill must have put something in my drink. Next thing I knew I was feeling higher'n a kit and they were telling me something. I must have been locoed, all right, because they were telling me how to get the money out of Miss Painton's dad's safe, and it sounded like a swell idea to me."

His eyes became smoky as remembrance came to him. "When I came to they had the money—and I had a headache that felt as though someone had clouted me with a brick. Clanton told me what I'd done, and said if I didn't stick around with them he'd expose me. I . . . I was over a barrel. I didn't want to be shown up as a thief, and I didn't want to go with them. But I figured I'd have to do it until they planned a job, and then mebbe I could queer things. But the first job they pulled was the Skeleton Canyon massacre. Clanton knew you were coming back and wanted you out of the way, besides wanting all your money. He spread word around months ago that you were in the gang, too, hoping you'd hear of it and be afraid to come back for fear of being bushwhacked by the law. When that didn't work —well, you know what happened. But, Dane—I swear I had no more part in that thing than you did!" Jim took a step forward, his face earnest, pleading.

Like warm water breaking up an ice-clogged stream, truth began to course through Dane's mind. He stood rigid. And suddenly his shoulders slumped, and he groaned: "And I almost—"

Jim was across the room in a flash. gripping one of Dane's shoulders with his good hand. His eyes were bright and moist.

Dane clutched the boy's arms tightly, tried to speak. But his throat was rough and choked. Then, before he could say a word, an ominous sound lifted to them from the canyon outside.

The eyes of every man in the room swung to face the door. Chico Morales whirled from the window with an oath. "*Valgame!* They come. Five of them!"

John Painton's keen old eyes scanned the trail through the brush and boulders. "Clanton and the toughest men in Cochise County," he said despairingly. "Charlie Snow, Jake Gauze, Joe Hill, and Frank McLowery. And we're only two able-bodied men and three sick ones."

Dane's reflexes leaped. This was the showdown! He might die, but at least he had the chance to take with him the murderers who had so nearly finished him twice, now. An exultant pound of excitement was in his brain as he strode to the door and looked out. Hurriedly, he turned back.

"We can't stay in here," he said quickly. "They'd smoke us out like rats. We've got to spread out behind rocks and trees. And quick!" Suiting action to his words, he sprang through the doorway and made for the trail.

At his heels came the others. Two old men, two wounded ones, one able-bodied one made up the fighting forces. Dane knew the odds were against them, for they were pitted against professional gun fighters, but he knew, too, that they had something on their side that the others did not: The knowledge that they were fighting for their rights. And that factor had turned many a massacre into a rout.

Hunkered down behind a big boulder, Dane sized up the setting in a swift glance. To his left, a tangle of blackjack and buckthorn that made a perfect screen for undercover work. To his right, the steep canyon slope studded with rocks. Straight ahead—the bare path.

Even as Dane watched, Frank McLowery sighted them. The renegade was short and lithe, with black hair and a week-old stubble of black beard on his jowls. He flung up one hand and shouted: "There they are, boys! Give it to 'em!"

Through the early morning quiet a single shot rang out. Lanky Jake Gauze doubled up in full flight and struck the ground rolling, carried off his feet by the force of a slug. One shrill scream wrenched itself from his lips and then he was still.

Near Dane, Catastrophe Jones muttered: "Tally one!" and jacked another shell into his long rifle.

Before the echoes off Gauze's scream died away, the canyon flamed into life. From both ends of the little draw gun flashes stabbed out behind rocks and trees. The screaming whine of slugs spinning off granite filled the gorge with shrill echoes.

Dane's bleak eyes scanned the brush for a careless gunman. Without warning a shot whined through the air close to him, kicked rock splinters into his face. He ducked back, holding his breath while more shots fingered after him. Something was mighty wrong! He was being shot at from close range!

He hugged the dirt. Sweeping a hasty glance about, he picked out the gleam of a rifle barrel and threw down hurriedly on the sniper who had crawled within twenty feet of him. His gun bucked against his hand but there was only the sound of brush crackling to denote the passing of his shot. No time was left for a second shot. He sprang up and darted for a new shelter.

The air seemed pierced with a hundred arrows as Dane legged it frantically for a shallow depression back of a rock. A hot knife seemed to sheer through his thigh. Pain shot through him and brought lines of agony about his eyes. Before he knew what had happened, he was sprawling in the dirt of the path!

In a flash he was up and crawling on, but not before the ground sang all about him with slugs that were dangerously close. An involuntary cry of pain escaped him as a bullet creased his neck and brought warm blood seeping inside his shirt. Then he flopped into the depression and crouched there without moving for a second.

AFTER a few moments the raking fire that threw dirt all over him began to taper off. Dane raised up a little and cast a cautious glance about. His eyes widened with apprehension as the bushwhacker who had flushed him darted from the screen of brush. With a shout, he ran into the very backs of the helpless cabin defenders, triggering as he came. From his position he could easily bring them all into the open, to be cut down like slaughtered cattle!

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And then, squarely in his path, a lean, bloodstained figure arose—Jim Wester. He raised the gun in his left hand and fired twice. The renegade stiffened, threw up his arms, and let his rifle clatter to the ground. A third time the kid blasted lead into him. The last shot flung the outlaw on his back, dead as he hit the ground.

A breath of relief swelled Dane's chest. He turned back to the three men who still lurked ahead. Abruptly, he stiffened, as a wild rebel yell echoed back and forth across the arroyo. The source of it was hard to place. Apprehensively Dane looked about, striving to find the unseen fighter who had shouted.

In the next moment the sounds of a struggle within the thicket came to the ears of the fighters. There were two shots in quick succession, and then the sound of struggling in the buckthorn. Suddenly two men lurched from behind small trees and made for new hideouts. Dane rose up and threw down on the first renegade, fat Charlie Snow. His guns were hot and bucking in his hands as he snapped off two shots. Snow stopped running. As he turned around Dane saw blood streaming from a wound in his face. The outlaw raised his rifle slowly, as though it had suddenly become very heavy, but it never came to his shoulder. A crackling fusillade of shots from John Painton and Catastrophe brought him down for good.

Now Dane left his vantage point and went as fast as he could, limping at every step, toward the still furious struggle in the brush. The other man who had sided Charlie Snow had gone down in his tracks. But there was still no sign of Old Man Clanton. Mingled emotions of anger and desperation clutched at Dane as he ran down the trail. If the leader of the renegades had escaped, the job would still be unfinished. Dane put on all the speed his lame leg could provide in his determination to smoke Clanton out.

Almost in his path a grotesque figure staggered from the brush. The torn red pantaloons told Dane that it could only be one man—Chico Morales. Even before Dane could reach his side, the little *dorado* sagged gently to the ground.

Dane went down on one knee beside him, his face grave with concern. Chico opened his eyes and smiled at him. His right hand raised something that dripped blood, and a weak chuckle came from his lips. The thing he grasped was the long, white beard of Old Man Clanton.

Dane had to bend close to Chico to catch his labored words. "I get heem, Señor Wester," the Mexican was saying. "I have to cut off hees beard to reach his throat—but I get heem!" Then the black eyes closed, and Chico's head lolled over in Dane's arms.

Silently Dane stood up and turned away. His heart was heavy, but some new emotion was stilling the grief. The battle was finished. His own battle with a grief that he had thought could never be ended was finished, too. The old life was done.

Up ahead he saw Sue Painton running down the path toward him, and a faint smile touched his lips. He didn't say anything as he took her in his arms, but he was thinking a lot. He was thinking that the new life ahead of him, with this golden-haired girl at his side, would be as sweet and promising as the rising sun that now gilded the trees.

THE END.

Forced into a partnership with back-shooting Bowie Bart the owlhoot trail became sinister and deadly for that

BUTTON BUSCADERO

BY H. FREDRIC YOUNG

BILLY STEADMAN sat on the back porch of his home, using one knee as a desk. A slender youth of fifteen, the light of adventure in his eyes was still mellow. He was engaged in the first step of the most momentous occasion in his life: making his initial plunge into danger.

"You ain't welchin'!" Bart yelled and before Billy could get away the outlaw had him.

At his feet, the victim of an occasional guilty glance from his master, hunkered a yellowish, expressive-faced mutt. The sun, glittering floridly on the gabled crest of Durango Slope, splashed a dove-gray light against the youth's tense face. A stub pencil in his fingers wiggled out the message as he gazed fixedly at the white paper.

DEAR PA AND MA:

There comes a time in every man's life when he has to leave home and I reckon my time has come. Don't be mad at me but I am taking my horse and riding south to get a job punching cattle. One less mouth to feed will help—

He paused, eyes batting at a slight moisture, mouth compressed with a fifteen-year-old pride. Did that sound all right? What would they think of him if they knew his real purpose. Would it break them both if they discovered he had turned bad? But they wouldn't—couldn't know! No one would know that Billy Steadman had pulled the trick. He'd just show up in a couple of months with enough money for that leg operation for his dad. He'd tell them he had made it on a cattle trade. He wrote on:

Don't worry, I am plenty old to grub for myself. Pa, I am borrowing your old Colt—

He stopped. A wet nose nuzzled his hand.

"You're going to stay here this trip, Rusty," he told the dog huskily, shifting his glance downward. Impulsively, he rubbed the mutt's ear, and the dog wagged its tail with real canine enthusiasm. "Don't bother me now, Rusty. Can't you see I'm busy."

His thoughts foraged to the trail ahead. He could visualize old Lum Neally hoarding his gold in his measly cabin. Well, the county would take care of Lum. He was old and crippled, anyhow, deaf as a wagon spoke, and couldn't enjoy the money. With no one to keep but himself and his old sheep dog, Shawnee, Lum Neally had several small pokes of gold hidden in his cabin. The hour to execute his crime was rapidly approaching so Billy hastened on with his writing:

I may not be back for several months but I have a feeling I am coming back with plenty of money. Enough to send pa to Chicago for that operation. So this is good-by until we meet again.

He pinned the note to the screen of the back door. His father and mother, on a trip to Cedarton in the big tasseled surry, would not return until late on the morrow. He had plenty of time to be miles away. He walked to his horse, yanked at the cinch and stepped into the saddle. The dog bounced ahead.

"No, Rusty," he said. "Stay here. No!" Rusty raced round and round after his tail, laughed with his eyes. Billy swallowed a couple of times. "Good-by, Rusty. There, stand on the porch."

The yellow cur obediently mounted the steps, turned and wagged bodily. Billy flicked his spurs and his bay gelding cantered across the wide yard. His eyes caught a last glance of the calico kitchen curtains, and then they swept to the trail ahead. Before him the mesa ran into purple-shot hills, high and flat and broken. A breeze stirred the blue bandanna around his neck, and he heard the first murmur of night noises rising lazily and falling against the dusk. His jaw muscles quivered into hard knots. It would be a long, long time before he heard again the faint familiar rustling along this valley.

WHENEVER Billy was squeamish about any particular task his father always explained it this way: "Sure, a hot iron hurts a calf. But this is a cattle ranch. Slap on that iron! That's the ticket, son. There'll be a heap of jobs in your life that give you the same feeling. But you got to lock up the old conscience and throw away the key. That's the ticket!"

Youthful Billy recalled those words, and in a measure he had locked his conscience in an unoccupied brain cell and thrown away the key.

Sight of the stars brimming the heavens reminded him of the crackling fire in the big front room at home. A room with the lamp flickering low, glowing with the merry blushes of a pine-log fire. His mother was there.

"Billy," she'd say, and he'd nod. "Look at the picture there."

It was a large oil painting directly across from the fireplace, and he always half turned to view it. The painting depicted a courier in fringed buckskin garb. In the dim perspective could be seen his pony, riddled with Pah-Ute arrows. The man was stumbling forward, a bloody splotch crimsoning one shoulder and a mail *mochila* clutched desperately in one hand. On his face was the expression of massed, dauntless pride. Beneath his feet was painted this simple inscription: "The Mails Go Through."

"That's Uncle Bob," he'd say pridefully. I'd like to be like him."

"He had a job to do, Billy boy. Nothing stopped him from doing that job. Floods and Indians alike tried, but nothing, nothing—"

"Tell me, ma," he'd beg, "about the time Uncle Bob delivered the President's message."

And again that ride would live in the long, flame-quivering room. Exploding hoofbeats, a streak in the night, Virginia City, Sandy Creek, an owlhoot from a Pah-Ute's throat.

Billy shivered and he glanced back once, and his pony stopped. Several minutes passed, and he was jerked by the realization that his horse was motionless. He held his hand to his head, as if to single out the two factions battling in his brain. "Turn back!" cried one, while the other just seemed to laugh mockingly and point to the trail ahead. Then he gouged in his spurs, and his pony leaped forward.

Down the slope the moon rays were tumbling vagrantly through lacy boscage. All over the range was the scent of night blooms, and on a high flat bench Billy could see the pine-pole cabin of Lum Neally against the irregular sequences of rocky outcroppings and shale narrows. He reined up.

He thought, "Lum's asleep in his little back room." And then he added aloud, "I know where he hides those pokes. Under the floor. He's too deaf to hear me. The second board in front of the fireplace is loose."

"Looks like we got the same idea, bub," chuckled a low voice.

A sudden terror struck Billy as his glance shot around, expecting the figure that was not instantly forthcoming. The chuckle was repeated, at last materializing into a blocky form. In the half light the man appeared tall and broad, and with him came the detestable stench of body sweat and whiskey. He stepped forward with a cocksure swagger and arrogance, his face boldly eager.

"I . . . I was just talking to my-

self," Billy confessed stammeringly.

The other kept monotonously chuckling. "Yeah. I heard you, bub."

"Who . . . who are you?" asked the youth.

"Bowie Bart is what John Law calls me," the man replied. "Ever hear of Bowie Bart?"

Billy had, and had heard that Bart was an elusive, dangerous and clever outlaw. He wondered if he should admit it.

"I . . . reckon I've heard your name," said Billy.

"What's your name, bub?"

"Billy—"

"That's enough. From now on it'll be Bill. You've growed to a man, so forget the kid stuff. Me and you is gonna be pards, Bill. Look! I heard about that old miser up there, and that's why I'm here. And from what I heard you say, that's why you're here, too. You know the layout, I got the experience. That's what it takes to make good pards, Bill, a combination. And we got it. Huh?"

Billy didn't try to fool himself, he was a little scared. He remembered Big Peter, his cat, mauling a rat with his hooked claws. He felt like that rat. In some ways this intruder was like Big Peter; he had a cattish grin, a lithe step, a sort of deep-throated purring in his breath. And still this man had nerve, experience. It meant a split of loot, but what of that?

"Sure!" exclaimed Billy suddenly.

"That's fine," Bowie Bart nodded. "You just lead the way around the deadfalls and old Bart he'll do the dirty work."

"The old man's deaf, he can't hear nothing," Billy confided to his newly acquired partner, and the other chuckled.

So, dismounting, youthful Billy led the way upslope. Fifty feet from the cabin the youth gasped. The old sheep dog, Shawnee, was baying toward them. Bowie Bart cursed and reached for his hip.

"Don't . . . don't shoot him!" Billy pleaded.

Bowie Bart laughed. "Nothing like that, Bill," he said, jerking a small package from his pocket. "Bart he carries along medicine for dogs. Look! A hunk of fresh meat for that mutt. That'll put him on our side."

Billy felt a sudden respect for this man's canny ingenuity. "Jehoshaphat!" he whispered, eyeing his big companion.

Bowie called to the dog in a soft, cajoling tone. Shawnee stopped, sniffed with waning suspicion, growled low and circled the intruders.

"Here, mutt," whispered Bart hoarsely, wheeling slowly as Shawnee kept circling.

The dog then caught the scent of the fresh meat and drew closer. Suddenly Bart pitched the meat at Shawnee's feet. The old sheep dog gulped it down, stood still a moment fanning his bushy tail.

"He won't bother us no more," growled the outlaw. "C'mon, Bill."

Curbing his excitement the youth turned toward the cabin. Shawnee bounded eagerly ahead, staggered erratically, then gulped and pitched on his side.

"What's the matter with that dog?" queried the boy.

Bowie Bart laughed almost silently, then snarled: "Poisoned meat, you fool! Think I'm gonna have that mutt snapping at our heels when we enter the place?"

Poison! The youth's mind flashed back a few weeks, to a dismal day when Rusty, his own dog, had grov-

Continued on page 88

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Continued from page 86

eled in the paroxysms of tainted food. Self-blame gripped Billy until he felt dizzy, nauseated, pinched beneath the belt. A current of sudden hatred for this man, for himself even, ran through him. His legs wanted to buckle but he gritted his teeth and looked at the suffering dog.

"Get moving!" snapped Bart. "We gotta get this job done pronto."

They were almost against the cabin wall. "Look," whispered Billy, "maybe you ought to wait here while I circle the place just to make sure."

Bart's eyes lidded sleepily, and his lips quirked at one corner. "Yeah," he said. "But make it fast."

CROUCHING, Billy sped around the cabin's corner and once beyond sight of the outlaw something went strange inside him. He stopped there in the darkness, feeling that he was teetering on the brim of a smoky caldron. What should he do? Back there lay Shawnee, perhaps past human aid. To help that dog meant to defeat the purpose of his presence here. Inside was Lum Neally, innocent of any impending danger. Billy threw a frantic glance back across one shoulder and shivered. There stood Bowie Bart, his darkish face writhing in a sort of unpleasant grin.

"Figurin' on welchin', huh?" whispered the man sibilantly.

"I ain't . . . I ain't goin' through with it!" Billy said defiantly.

The outlaw snickered, half yawning. "Oh, yes you are."

The calmness of those words stung Billy. His eyes darted around for an avenue of escape. A few feet to his left he saw a brushy ravine. It wandered crazily downslope. Doubling down, he leaped for it. He heard a curse behind, then the thump and scrape of boot heels. The sound was hard upon him and he began cutting zigzag through the brush. Fingers closed on the flying tail of his jumper and his legs pumped as never before, keeping him a scant foot ahead of those murderous hands. Once he had heard the hungry panting of a mountain lion, and that was the sound now in his ears. Once more there was a tugging at his jumper, and this time his legs found no new burst of speed. He heard the snarling laugh of Bowie Bart as he felt the man's grip on his jumper tighten until it was inescapable.

With a cry Billy threw up his arms, twisted his shoulders, and slipped free of the garment. He pivoted at an abrupt angle, saw the big man sprawl headlong over a brush attempting to follow. He ran faster, spurred by sudden hope. With room to maneuver he slithered down the coulee floor another hundred feet, scamped up on the level and clawed forward.

A few feet farther he stopped and threw himself flat, one ear pressed against the earth. He lay there until he was certain there was no pursuit, then rose and tried to get his bearings. Then he moved forward, searchingly, at last finding the gasping Shawnee. He scooped up the dog in his arms, almost running toward his horse. He was half sobbing when he heaved his burden across the saddle and headed home, himself striding the skirt.

Above the drum of hoofs Billy heard a muffled explosion from behind. He imagined it must be the outlaw pursuing him with a rifle. He shouted with mad frenzy at his horse and the beast stretched out, ears flat, pounding along the timber

trail. Across high flats and again on a dim trail, then plunging lower into yawning chasms of sulphurous blue depths.

Billy looked down at the dog, wondering if the beast were still alive. Every second seemed to be winging like a swooping hawk. Billy slid a hand along the matted hair of Shawnee's breast, thrilling as he felt a faint heart beat. He raced on.

The turn of events had made him forget what had been a mission, a boyish determination to succeed against almost hopeless odds. "What about dad?" he thought suddenly. He had failed! One gloomy thought linked onto another, until all the trail ahead seemed black with muted questions. His eyes dropped to Shawnee as his thoughts went back to Lum Neally's cabin and Bowie Bart. Perhaps there was yet time to hit the back trail. Riding forward at a madcap pace his eyes turned back. He wanted to drag on the reins, wheel his flying horse, but he kept driving forward into the silvered night.

Half an hour later he was rounding the barn, thundering across the open yard of his home.

AS the snorting horse slid to a halt, Billy hit the earth and lifted Shawnee from the saddle. The dog seemed lifeless and as the youth stood there looking down, a shudder raked his frame.

"I never meant to do this!" he burst out.

Rusty bounded stiffly out of the night, baring his white fangs an instant then joyously chasing his tail. But at sight of Shawnee he stiffened.

"You leave him alone," Billy said sharply. "He's sick. Go 'way—get from under my feet, Rusty."

He picked up Shawnee and lay him on the porch. Then he went in-

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side and brought out a lighted lantern.

"Lemme see, vinegar and egg whites are good," he mumbled thoughtfully. "That's what done the job for Rusty." A choked sob went out of him suddenly, more from thought of failure than anything else.

He hurried into the kitchen, rummaging in the pantry until he found half a dozen eggs. He spent a few moments separating yolk from white, grabbed a funnel and hurried again to the porch. He forced the funnel tip between the sheep dog's locked teeth and worked the egg white down his throat.

Billy waited awhile, closely watching the dog for some sign of reaction. When none came, he went to the kitchen and returned with a cup of vinegar which he poured down the dog's throat.

Rusty pranced about importantly.

"I don't know what else to do, Rusty," said Billy dispiritedly.

Rusty barked, as if lending personal encouragement to his master.

The moon slid lower, saddening the range land, while a nighthawk lent its maddening screech to the setting. The faint bay of a gray lobo rolled sluggishly from afar. The youth shivered a little, while a wet nose nudged his palm.

Tears were in Billy's eyes as for a sickening instant the intimate memory of failure filled his mind. Why hadn't he gone on with Bowie Bart? Gone now his hopes, his dad's hopes.

Movement on the ground brought Billy back to the present moment. Shawnee was stirring! Half apprehensively, Billy felt a surge of joy. Suddenly he fell into a babbling, excited conversation with Rusty: "Look, Rusty, he's trying to raise his head. Here, maybe I better help him. It's working! The vinegar and egg white."

The sun was an hour high in a blue-walled sky as Billy Steadman again took to the trail. He could barely keep his eyes open, for he had slept but a fitful three hours. But his face was clear of fear and dread, and at his horse's heels, a trifle weak and wobbly, trotted the old sheep dog, Shawnee.

Occasionally Billy would stop and dismount, giving the dog a rest. He didn't know just what he'd say to old Lum Neally.

As he broke into the clearing and saw the cabin, he jerked his horse to a stop. Several men were grouped around the cabin door, some passing in and out. They all carried rifles. Suddenly Billy's heart skipped. Perhaps Bowie Bart had killed Lum!

The boy spurred forward. Something *was* wrong. There stood Sheriff Briscoe and a couple of his deputies.

"Howdy, Billy," said the sheriff as the youth mismounted and stepped forward. "What you— Hey! There's Shawnee with the kid. Hey, Lum! Thunderation, he can't hear me. Somebody go in and tell Lum that his dad-blamed hound is here. Mebbe he'll quit moonin'."

In a few moments the old man hobbled out on the porch, his deep-lined face lighting a little. Shawnee wagged toward the old man. He licked the gnarled fingers which tousled his ear. Neally looked sternly at the youth.

"Bowie Bart said he poisoned Shawnee," said Lum gravely. "How come you bring back my dog?"

"I . . . I found him," Billy explained weakly.

"You'll have to holler, Billy," chuckled the sheriff.

Continued on page 92

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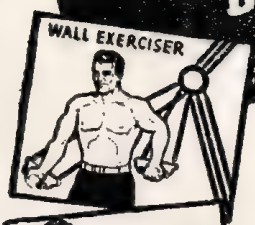

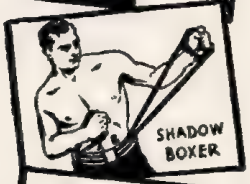

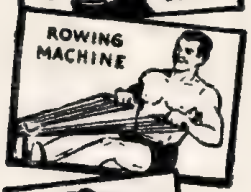

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Continued from page 90

"I found him!" yelled the boy. "He . . . he was sick, so I took him home and doctored him all night." He thought, "Bowie Bart talked! *I wonder—*" After all, everyone's eyes were pinned on him.

"It must've been right what Bart said as he was dying about poisoning Shawnee," put in the sheriff. Then he added with studied drollness, "A man the likes of him *shoulda* died."

Only one thing made an impression on Billy. *Bowie Bart was dead!*

BILLY'S eyes shifted to the doorway. A strange framework constructed of thin saplings and baling wire stood back a few feet from the threshold. Cached like a big black spider in that framework was a double-barreled shotgun. There was a string on the trigger that ran off somewhere then doubled back toward the door, where the broken end lay on the pine floor. Billy's eyes bulged.

The sheriff laughed. "That's how Bart met his end, Billy. He was trying to rob Lum's cabin, but Lum he had a trap set for sneak thieves —a thousand-dollar trap. That's the reward Lum gets for capturing that crook."

Billy nodded, his senses stunned. That gun trap—it might have been he who walked into it. But he'd given away his chances to Lum's fortune to save a dog and by the same token the dog had saved him! Then he heard old man Neally speaking.

"Much obliged for saving my dog, boy," said Lum with a slight nod. "Don't reckon I'd get along so good without Shawnee. And mebbe you better ride up once in a while to see how your patient is getting along. You're Shawnee's doc, you know."

The men laughed and Billy began to suspect that the old man had something inside him besides granite. He wanted awfully much to tell Lum a fantastic story—perhaps he could some day when he was visiting his patient. Until then he'd have to live with that fantastic tale congested in his throat, a sort of unripened fruit that dripped its bitter juices into his innermost depths, a gall as bitter as failure.

Suddenly he made a dash for his horse, landed astride, but a raspy voice halted him.

"Hey," bawled old man Neally half angrily. "Where in tarnation you going? Don't answer, I couldn't hear you nohow." He turned to Sheriff Briscoe. "I'm splittin' that there reward with this young fella for savin' my dog. Have the checks made that way."

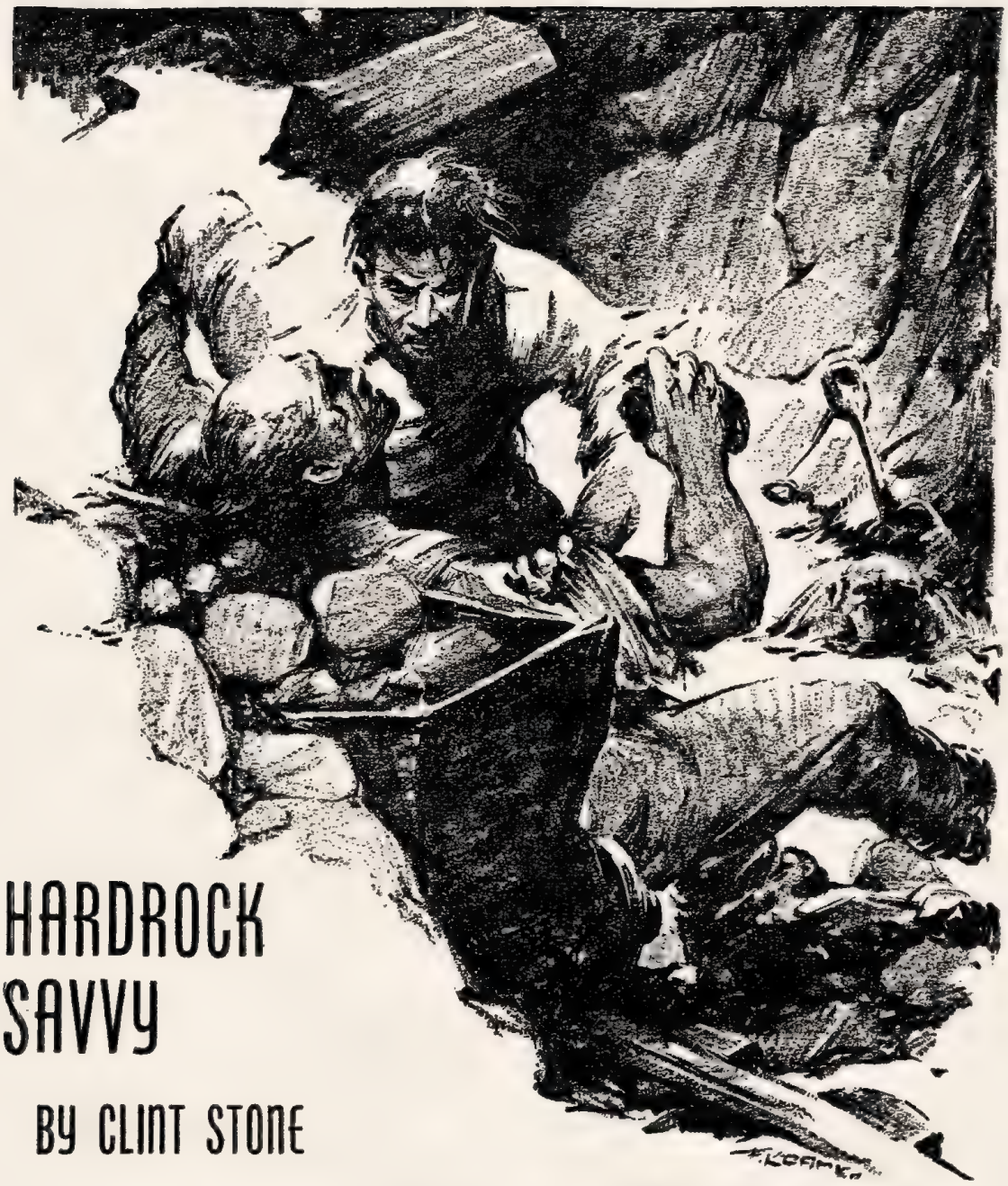
Billy opened his mouth to protest, but could only utter a gasp. He began to smile then, and lift his head higher and higher. His dad would get well after all. And suddenly Billy remembered that his dad and mother must be getting close to home now in the tasseled surry. That note on the back screen—he hadn't taken it down. Abruptly Billy was a mad blur crashing through the thickets.

"Hey you, Billy!" laughed the sheriff. "What's your hurry?"

"Must be hightailin' it for home to tell his pap the good news," chuckled a deputy.

The sheriff studied the retreating figure of the boy thoughtfully. "Now there's a contrast for you, men," he said pleasantly. "Bowie Bart lost the money by trying to steal it, and his life to boot. While this kid here—he won it by not stealing it."

THE END.



HARDROCK SAVVY

BY CLINT STONE

All Hardrock Harrigan wanted was a chance to prove that a man with sand in his craw and plenty of savvy is never too old

It just didn't seem possible to Hardrock Harrigan, as he stood there in the Mercury May Mine with his fellow workers grouped around him, that he had come to the end of his rope; that in the next few minutes he would walk from the tunnel to the office, get his pay check for the last time, pack his bedroll and turn his back on the camp forever.

Gray hairs straggled from under the sweatband of his battered old hat. Tears glistened in eyes that were crow-tracked at the corners. Emotion straightened his lips, erasing for the moment the deep lines

and furrows on his weather-tanned face. His shirt was open at the neck, exposing a chest matted with hair. A powerful man yet, this Hardrock Harrigan, despite his sixty years, but powerful only in spurts.

The shifter slapped him heartily on the back, trying to hide his own emotion. He had seen men grow old in the mining world, go out just like Hardrock was going now, and he'd never quite become used to it.

"Don't take it too hard, old-timer," he said, and walked away down the level.

Each of the miners had a word or two to say, awkwardly, roughly, gently as might be his mood at the moment, but every one was genuinely regretful. You didn't work in a mine with a man for years and then part from him without feeling it.

They followed the shifter to the mouth of the tunnel. Then Slim Scully and Pepper Pearson came from the crosscut. Slim was small, wiry, with pinched face and lid-shaded eyes, a veritable dynamo for work. Pepper Pearson was his exact opposite, tall and broad, with a powerful body like Hardrock's, except that years had not sapped much of its strength. Pepper and Slim worked "pardners" in the crosscut.

"Well, Hardrock," Pepper said, "on your way out for the last time, huh? Makes a guy wonder what he done with his last ten years' wages, don't it? So long."

Slim Scully stopped and looked up into Hardrock's lined face. "Too old, huh?" he observed harshly. "Well, don't take it too hard. There's still the Miners' Home for the likes of you." He turned and followed Pepper, laughing.

Hardrock winced under the cut, and his shoulders sagged a little as he watched Slim pass out of the tunnel. Then he glanced around, seeing little of the mine beyond the pale glow of his candle, but loving every inch of it. It was hard to go. Hard to leave a mine where you have worked for years, through good ones and bad ones, not only for Jim Denton, the boss, but for Jim's father before him.

He just couldn't understand Jim letting him go. Not now. Not when they'd lost the cinnabar vein and had spent months searching for it. He'd like to have stayed, if only until that vein had been found again. Jim needed men like him; miners with years of experience, who would give everything they had for the success of the Mercury May.

A tear rolled down each dust and sweat-caked cheek and Hardrock brushed them away with the back of a hard, calloused hand. Jim couldn't mean this—kicking an old-timer off the pay roll just because he was so much older than the others. He only had the shifter's word for it that Jim had said that; said that he was too old to be kept on. Of course, he could go to the office and ask Jim point-blank, beg him to—

"No, I'll be doggoned if I will!" Hardrock muttered. "I ain't grovelin' to nobody. I'll take my medicine like a man; others have had to."

Something of the old spirit coursed through him and he squared his shoulders as he walked slowly down the level to the mouth. He hung the hook of his candlestick over the edge of a rock at the entrance, blew out the light, and stepped outside.

He hadn't wanted to go to the office at all, but now he knew there was no way out of it. He'd have to draw his time. Then he'd roll his bedding and slip quietly from the camp without further ado. If Jim wanted him back—well, it was up to him to say so. He might at least

have sent for him quietly and broken the news, instead of sending word by the shifter so the rest of the boys could hear.

HARDROCK was just about to step into the office when he heard a voice. He glanced up sharply, looking through the open doorway. Jim Denton was seated at his desk. Beside him stood Rand Rawson, a mining promoter. Rawson, sharp-featured, dark, was smoking a long stogie. It was he whom Hardrock had heard speaking.

"Ain't no use keeping on, Jim," he was saying. "There ain't a chance of you finding that lost vein. Take my offer. Tell you what I'll do. I'll make it twenty thousand. That's five more than I offered you yesterday."

That was a surprise and a shock to old Hardrock Harrigan. He had never dreamed that Jim would even consider selling the Mercury May for ten times twenty thousand. But, he recollected suddenly, he, Hardrock, was out of it now—fired. He didn't give a damn what happened to the mine. He wished the two of them would get through chewing the rag so that he could go in and get his time.

Young Jim Denton lifted a pair of shrewd eyes to Rand Rawson. "Rand," he said, "you were never known to invest a dollar in anything that you didn't know beforehand would bring you a hundred for every one you spent. You know how long I've been searching for that cussed vein and—"

Rawson removed the stogie from a pair of thin lips and gestured through the window with it toward

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the Cascades that pyramided above the camp.

"That vein has pinched off and you ain't never going to find it. The Cascades is faulty as all get out, and every mining man knows it. Your dad lost that vein twice, and went pretty nigh broke trying to locate it again. This time it's gone for keeps. There's just one chance in a million, Jim, that you'll find—"

"And that's the chance I'm taking, Rand," Jim declared grimly. "I'm betting on the Denton luck to the last cent I've got. That's final. And if you're so cocksure I'll never locate the vein again, why are you offering me twenty thousand for the mine?"

Rawson stuck the stogie back in his mouth and talked around it. "All right. I'll tell you why, Jim. I know an outfit that's ready to start development work on some claims, but they ain't got the dough to buy new machinery with. I can sell 'em all your gear and double my money. You could do the same thing, only you don't know the name of the outfit. Now there's my cards, right on the table before you. Take it or leave it."

Hardrock leaned against the office wall wearily. He had put in a hard shift and he didn't give a hang whether Jim sold the mine or not. Nevertheless, just the suspicion of a thrill ran through him when he heard Jim's direct answer to Rand Rawson.

"I'm sticking with the Mercury till hell freezes over."

Rawson tried to shrug it off, but he couldn't hide the expression of disappointment that crossed his face. "You're the doctor," he began with pretended lightness. "But if—"

There was a dull thud, as if a giant had hit the ground with a huge sledge hammer, followed by a slight tremor. Jim was on his feet instantly, passing Rawson on his way to the door. Hardrock Harrigan straightened suddenly, as if the office wall had hit him a belt in the back. Miners poured from the bunkhouse, wide-eyed with surprise.

Every eye was turned in the direction of the mine mouth. An eerie silence had followed the thud and tremor. It lasted for a few seconds, and then a cloud of amber dust shot from the tunnel.

"She's caved!" Hardrock cried.

The miners echoed the cry as they raced toward the tunnel's mouth, led by the shifter. Jim Denton stood in the doorway as if paralyzed by the shocking news.

"That offer's still good, Jim," Rawson said. "There ain't a doubt she's caved. What chance you got of finding the lost vein now? Listen, I've got the dough with me. Sign this—"

But suddenly the young mine owner came to life, leaping from the doorway and chasing after his men to the tunnel. Hardrock followed, his old joints creaking, muscles protesting. Rawson turned back to the desk and sat down in Jim's chair, legs crossed, stogie drawing.

DUST was still pouring from the tunnel when the miners arrived. They lit their candles and then stepped back to let Jim Denton through. Hastily tying a handkerchief over his mouth and nose, he disappeared through the entrance, followed by the men. Hardrock, who was winded by the short, rapid run, remained outside in the fresh air to catch his breath.

He had finally got back his wind and was about to step into the tunnel when he heard footsteps approaching. He stepped aside and waited. Two men were coming down

the level, Jim Denton and the shifter. Jim was talking hurriedly.

"The men'll have to work all night to get that mess cleaned up. Keep them at it in two-hour shifts. Have those that aren't actually working at the cave-in run some empty mine cars onto the crosscut switch. The minute the first string is loaded, have a crew dump them while another crew shoves in the empties. I'll get rid of Rawson in a hurry, change clothes, and be right back with you."

Jim darted out of the tunnel and hurried back to the office, so absorbed he did not notice Hardrock. The shifter turned and went back along the level. Hardrock waited until Jim had entered the office, then stepped into the mine. The bobbing pin point of light in the distance was the shifter's candle.

Hardrock smiled grimly, then reached up and unhooked his candlestick from the ledge of rock where he had hung it on leaving the mine for what he had thought was the last time. He lit the candle and traversed the level until he came to the crosscut, where Pepper Pearson and Slim Scully had been working before the cave-in.

Miners passed Hardrock on their way out for empty mine cars and timbers, but no one paid any attention to him in the excitement of the moment. Hardrock turned into the crosscut and joined the miners at the cave-in. So thick was the dust that their candle flames gave out but little light. But there was enough for Hardrock to see the rived and twisted timbers and lagging sticking out from the mess of rock and dirt. Just as Hardrock jabbed his candlestick in a broken timber and grabbed a shovel, the shifter spotted him.

"Hey, what're you doing here, Hardrock?" he demanded. "You were fired."

"I just met the boss comin' out o' the tunnel, and he re-hired me," Hardrock lied. "Gangway for the best cave-in cleaner-upper in the hull country! I've bored through

more cave-ins than you've ever saw, feller, and Jim Denton savvies it."

He pushed past the miners, shouldered Slim Scully aside, and started shoveling alongside Pepper Pearson. The crosscut echoed to their coughing, as the gritty dust irritated their lungs. With watering eyes, Pepper grinned at the old-timer's enthusiasm. The shifter, however, regarded him suspiciously.

"Git half of these guys out o' the way," Hardrock said, "or I'll be trompin' them underfoot."

"Not such a bad idea, at that," the shifter said, and turned to the men. "Better get out into the fresh air and rest up till it's your turn to tackle the cave-in." He turned back to Pepper and Slim Scully, who was scowling at Hardrock. "You three'll work the first two-hour shift. I'll be back presently."

Slim continued to lean on the handle of his shovel and scowl at Hardrock after the shifter and the others had left the crosscut. The old miner shot a glance at him as he heaved a shovelful over his shoulder into the first mine car.

"Don't stand there like a wooden Injun," he said. "Grab a root and growl."

"Since when was you made shifter?" Slim demanded. "I ain't taking orders from no stove-up old galoot like you. I don't savvy why the shifter didn't put somebody in your place who can shovel."

"I ain't givin' no orders," Hardrock retorted. "But if you don't git a hump on, you runt, I'm apt to snow you under with rock and dirt."

Pepper's bellowing laughter got under the small miner's hide and rankled. He glared at Hardrock.

"Two-hour shifts," he sneered. "Why, all that'll be left of you by then will be a grease spot on a rock. Snow me under, sez you! Anybody'd think you owned this here mine."

Hardrock straightened up, coughing. He turned a pair of watery, smarting eyes on Slim.

"Mebbe," he said, between deep breaths, "if you'd worked here as long as I have, you'd feel like you owned it, too."

"Aw, nuts!" Slim snarled. He started working again, but listlessly. They had just about loaded the first mine car with rocks and debris, when the shifter appeared. Without pausing, Hardrock glanced at him out of the corner of an eye. The dim light from the shifter's candle illuminated his face, and on it Hardrock read his fate.

"Reckon you'd better put that shovel down, Hardrock," the shifter said quietly. "I've just saw the boss, and he ain't re-hired you. I'll be sending one of the boys in to take your place."

IN the dim candlelight, Hardrock's face was haggard with disappointment. There was pity in Pepper Pearson's eyes, pity in the shifter's, as he started out of the crosscut, but nothing but vicious satisfaction in Slim Scully's. Hardrock leaned his shovel against the mine car, picked up his candle, and started to follow the shifter.

Slim Scully, watching with a cynical sneer, took a few steps after him. Pepper Pearson called him back, but Slim paid no attention.

"Hurry on back to the Miners' Home, you doddering old coot," he said brutally. "You've got your gall —coming back in here and trying to boss us around after you were fired. Who the devil you think you are, anyway?"

There was no self-pity in the old miner's eyes when he turned to reply. Instead, they held an expression of challenge, of defiance.

"At sixty," he said quietly, "I'm twice the man you are, Slim. I'd like to work alongside you for just one more shift, to show you up."

Pepper Pearson's hearty voice echoed in the crosscut. "That's telling him, Hardrock," he said approvingly. "Don't pay no attention to the little horse's neck. Any man who ever worked pardners with you in the Mercury May always felt safe. That's more'n I can say for Slim. So long and good luck, Hardrock."

Hardrock knew his boast was an empty one, and felt ashamed that he had made it. For as he turned again and started to walk away, he was conscious of his aching joints and muscles; conscious of the years pressing upon his shoulders.

He had only taken a few steps

Continued on page 100

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Continued from page 98

away from the cave-in, the candle in his hand dimly illuminating no more than one set ahead in the crosscut, when he came to a sudden stop, unbelieving eyes fixed on a timber that was slowly bending like a huge bow. Then came the growl and grind of moving rock and dirt. The bending timber suddenly splintered with an ear-splitting report. Friction, caused by the terrific pressure from above, created a blue flame that shot from the riven timber like a bolt of lightning.

Yelling a warning, Hardrock leaped backward. The growl and grind of rock increased to a roar. Set after set of timber collapsed as tons of loose rock and dirt caved down upon them. In a second escape to the level was cut off.

The concussion of falling rock drove a cloud of acrid dust full in Hardrock's face, snuffing out his candle and driving him back against the mine cars and the bristling breast of the first cave-in. But the second before the candle was blown out, Hardrock had seen a chunk of adamite plummet down from the roof, bounce on the mine-car track and hit Slim Scully at the base of the skull, felling him.

The din of crashing timbers and splintering lagging continued to mingle with the thunder of caving rock. Hardrock clapped hands over his nose and mouth, but the dust seeped through his fingers, plugging his lungs. Bent double, he started to cough and retch, and a terrible thirst contracted his throat.

There was nothing he could do except stand there, petrified with horror, expecting every moment to be his last. But, gradually, the awful din lessened, and Hardrock, fumbling for a match, lit the candle. Its feeble flame was a mere yellow splotch in the amber fog of swirling dust that gave little light; but that little was enough for the old miner to see that he was imprisoned in a living tomb, in a narrow space between the two cave-ins.

PANIC gripped Hardrock. He propped the candlestick in a piece of broken timber, then fell on his knees, tearing at the cave-in with bare hands. Pepper's dust-covered face appeared beside him in the candlelight, ghastly, eerie. He, too, clawed frantically at the loose rock and dirt, muttering hoarsely and incoherently. More rock and dirt kept caving down, thrusting the men away, bruising their bodies brutally.

Hardrock's tortured lungs made him pause. He stood up, fingers bleeding, shirt in rags, bathed in sweat, sucking in great gulps of dust-laden air. And while he stood there, the real danger of the situation drilled through into his consciousness, snapping him out of his state of panic.

He reached down a pair of massive, hairy arms, laid hold of the frantically digging Pepper, and flung him back against a mine car. Then he sank down beside him, coughing his heart out.

"We . . . we can't dig out that . . . that way," he finally croaked. "We're only . . . wastin' precious air . . . and strength."

It was growing hotter and hotter in the narrow confines between the two cave-ins as the dust settled in a thick pall over everything. And as it settled, the men could see and realize the predicament they were in.

"Reckon she's a purty bad cave-in," Pepper gasped. "We'll never get out alive!"

"Ain't but a small one," Hardrock said, and knew he was lying. But

he had caught the note of horror and helplessness in Pepper's voice, and he wanted to keep the truth from him: keep him from getting panicky again. The cave-in was a bad one, all right.

"Wonder . . . wonder how long it'll take the boys to . . . to dig through to us."

"You gotta quit talkin' and save yore breath," Hardrock rasped. "Ain't much air in here, savvy. Talkin' wastes it. We've . . . we've just gotta set still and . . . and wait."

"Wait!" Pepper repeated in a terrified whisper. "Wait for death!"

Hardrock said nothing. He leaned back against the mine car, mouth open, tongue lolling and coated with grit. His eyes kept turning from Slim Scully, stretched out, gasping for breath, blood from the wound in his head trickling down his cheeks, to the face of the cave-in, as if he expected to see men break through to their rescue.

Suddenly Hardrock sat up straight, staring with unbelieving eyes at the burning candles. The flames were hovering an inch above the wicks. Quickly Hardrock snuffed out his own and Pepper's. The latter struggled to his feet with an oath.

"Why did you do that?" he demanded raspingly. "Light 'em again. I savvy we're gonna die, but when death comes I wanna see it, not set here in the dark waiting for it. I can't stand this!"

Hardrock's groping fingers found Pepper's candlestick. He placed it and his own behind him, out of the other's reach.

"You're a miner, feller," he said,

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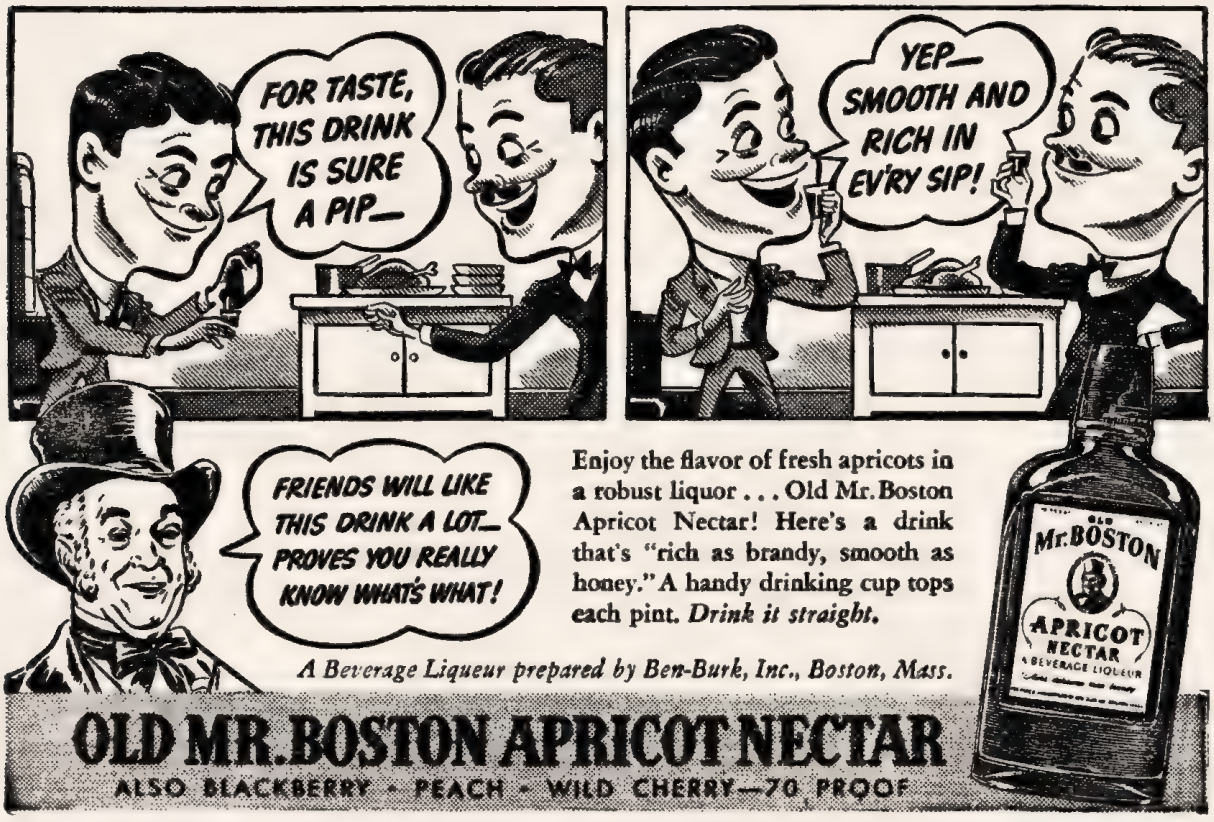
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"and you savvy the signs of bad air. Besides, them candles was burnin' up what little is left."

Pepper struck a match. His eyes were blazing insanely in its dim light. He caught sight of the candlesticks, as Hardrock came to his feet, and stepped over to pick one up. Hardrock shoved him away, sent him reeling, and the match went out.

Pepper caught his balance and lunged forward with groping arms, wrapping them around Hardrock in a powerful grip. The two of them grunted and cursed, the one trying to get at the candles, the other trying to stop him. They kept banging into the mine cars, trampling over Slim Scully, rolling over and over on the ground, breaking and securing holds. Tearing a hand loose, they crashed home telling blows.

Finally Pepper bent Hardrock across the sharp edge of a mine car. The old man felt his back breaking, felt his strength leaving him. He flung out a hand to brace himself against the excruciating pressure. His fingers touched rock in the car, closed around a chunk of it.

BLINDLY, with a prayer in his heart, Hardrock swung his arm in a wide circle, crashing the rock against Pepper's skull. His arms relaxed their pressure, slid down Hardrock's body as the man dropped, stunned.

Hardrock fell across him and lay there till he got back his wind. Then he rolled off Pepper and sat up. Intense darkness seemed to press against his eyeballs; darkness such as he had never experienced before. He was concerned about Pepper now, for the man lay without making a sound. Hardrock wondered if he had struck him too hard; had killed him. Slim Scully remained where he was, his breathing and groaning fainter now.

"I gotta do somethin'!" Hardrock muttered. "I gotta get these boys out—somehow!"

He lit one of the candles, and saw that Pepper was coming to. He searched until he found a broken shovel and attacked the cave-in. Every shovelful took just that much more toll of his fast-waning strength. Now the air was so bad that it seemed almost impossible to fill his lungs. Hardrock felt that he would have given the remaining years of his life for a drink of cool water at that moment.

Presently Pepper moved to his side. "I . . . I reckon I lost my head," he gasped. "I'll spell you off, Hardrock. Gimme that shovel."

An agonized cry for water came from Slim Scully. Hardrock handed over the broken shovel, pulled the candlestick from a timber and went over to him. He seemed to have shriveled since the cave-in. His face was white under the heavy coating of dust. He flailed the air weakly, trying to get a good breath of it.

Hardrock propped him up against a mine car and held him till he recovered enough strength to retain the position himself. Slim Scully turned his head slowly and looked at Hardrock with terror-stricken eyes.

"We'll never . . . never get out of here alive," he croaked. "Not me, anyway. That wallop on the head—when she caved—smashed my skull. I'm going to die, Hardrock!"

"No, you ain't. I'll get you out somehow. Look at Pepper, workin' like a . . . a badger."

But Pepper's shoveling was hardly more than a feeble gesture, for the rock and dirt kept sifting down at the slightest touch of the shovel, suffocating him and the others. The

foul air was getting worse by the minute, and the candle flame was higher above the wick than ever, threatening to go out entirely.

Presently Pepper tried to stagger to his feet, then fell on his side and lay still. Hardrock glanced at Slim Scully to see if he had noticed. But Slim hadn't taken his eyes off Hardrock's face, nor had he ceased his whimpering for water.

Hardrock's better judgment told him that he was doing the wrong thing by leaving that one candle burning, consuming what little air was left. Yet, with Pepper lying there in a heap and Slim staring at him with those terror-stricken eyes, he didn't have the heart to blow it out.

A trip hammer seemed to be pounding away unmercifully against Hardrock's brain, and his head felt ungainly on his shoulders. But the terrible ache of it could not dull the instinct of self-preservation; could not conquer the will to save himself and his companions.

By hanging to the edge of the mine car he managed to stand erect. Then, swaying and reeling, he went over to Pepper, plucked the shovel from the limp fingers, then painfully dragged the inert form away from the cave-in. Pepper's eyes were open, filled with hope as he watched Hardrock. His dust-coated lips moved, but no words came.

"That's all right, feller," Hardrock croaked. "I'll . . . I'll go through this . . . this cave-in like nobody's business."

When he bent to pick up the shovel, he fell forward on his knees. From that position he started digging, his efforts even weaker than Pepper's had been. His shovel soon struck a timber and the slight jar loosed an avalanche of rock and dirt that drove him staggering back, extinguishing the candle at the same moment. The cloud of dust that followed started all three men fighting for breath.

Gradually, like a weather-beaten old tree in the forest, Hardrock sank down, and it was a long time before he could muster strength enough to roll over and prop himself against a mine car. He thought of his candlestick, and fumbled aimlessly around on the ground for it. There were matches in his pocket, but his brain was too befuddled to remind him of the fact.

He leaned his head back against the car and closed his smarting eyes to shut out the awful blackness which seemed to hurt them more than the dust. But the one thing that he could not shut out from his dwindling consciousness was the intense silence that pounded against his ears in thunderous waves.

THEN, piercing through his consciousness, came the voice of Slim Scully—a pitiful, pleading whisper.

"I can't die till . . . till I've got this . . . this thing off my mind! Hardrock, are you alive? Hardrock!" Fingers plucked wearily at the old miner's shirt sleeve.

"What you . . . what you wanna say?" Hardrock asked, his own voice only a rasping whisper.

There was no immediate answer. Hardrock braced himself by placing both hands on the ground. He leaned over in Slim's direction, but the slight effort started his heart pounding. The agony in his lungs made him cough, leaving him weaker than ever.

Then Slim's voice began again. At first it seemed to boom through the deathlike silence of that living tomb, then it grew steadily weaker and weaker. Toward the last of it,

Hardrock was hardly able to distinguish a word.

Yet each word Slim uttered was indelibly imprinted on Hardrock's brain. He had the strange feeling that he should be startled at what he was hearing, but he just couldn't summon the slightest interest.

When the whispering ended, his head nodded until his chin rested on his hair-matted chest. The pounding silence decreased as the agony in his lungs increased. Hours later, even the sounds of the rescue crew, driving a coyote hole through the cave-in to the confines of his prison, failed to arouse him.

Consciousness partly returned, however, when they carried him out of the tunnel into the fresh air, then to the mine office, where they laid him on a cot. Gentle hands gave him water, washed the dust from eyes, ears and nostrils.

Even then, as Hardrock glanced around, he couldn't quite believe that he had been caught between two cave-ins. Rather, it still seemed that he was still standing outside the office, waiting for Jim Denton and Rand Rawson to get through chewing the rag about the Mercury May so that he could get his time and be on his way.

For the two men were there, the one seated at his desk, the other standing beside him, still talking about the search for the lost cinnabar vein and the sale of the Mercury May. Rand Rawson appeared more eager, more hopeful than ever of putting the deal through. On the other hand, Hardrock noticed, the light of grim determination seemed to have faded from Jim's eyes.

Hardrock's glance held steady on the young man's face. A voice, echoing away back in the recesses of his befogged brain, was telling him that he had a message for Jim Denton. But, for the life of him, he couldn't make his lips frame the words.

He saw Rawson lay papers on the desk and heard him say, "Well, Jim, there's the bill of sale and there's the dough. All you've got to do is sign on the dotted line and the dough's yours. It'll cost you thousands to clean out those two cave-ins, and even after you've done that, what you got to look forward to? You still ain't found the vein. On top of that, Slim Scully, Pepper Pearson and that old coot on the cot will sue you for all the traffic will bear."

JIM picked up the pen, dipped it in the ink, and held it poised over the bill of sale. Hardrock struggled to sit up, tried to speak, but only succeeded in making strange choking sounds that served to attract the mine owner's attention.

"What is it, Hardrock?" he asked wearily. "Is there something you want to say?"

"Oh, he's still raving—out of his noodle," Rawson observed hurriedly. "Listen, man, I've been here two days now, trying to save you from your fool self. Come on and sign."

Jim Denton didn't seem to have heard. He was watching the sweat pour down Hardrock's face, watching the contortion of the old man's lips, the terrific efforts he was making to speak.

And then, like a bombshell, the words exploded: "Don't sign that, Jim! Don't!"

"Why, Hardrock?" Jim demanded, rising from his chair.

"'Cause," Hardrock replied in a strangled voice, "when Slim Scully thought he . . . he was gonna croak, he told me—"

Rawson suddenly uttered an oath and whipped out a gun. The miners' warning cries blended with

the weapon's deafening report. A livid furrow appeared magically on Hardrock's hairy chest as the bullet plowed across it.

Jim Denton pivoted with a swinging fist that caught Rawson flush on the mouth, knocking him down. The next moment the mining promoter was at the bottom of the heap of cursing miners. Jim cleared the desk in a bound and reached the side of the cot.

"He shot you, Hardrock!" he cried, putting an arm around the old man.

"Just creased me," Hardrock assured him, essaying a smile. "Reckon I'm too tough to die, Jim. If two cave-ins couldn't do it, what chance has a slug got?"

The miners pinned Rawson's arms behind him and jerked him to his feet.

"What'll we do with him, Jim?" one demanded.

"We'll decide that in a minute or two, men. Now let's have the rest of it, Hardrock. What did Slim tell you that seems to have disturbed Rawson so much?"

"He told me he'd spotted the lost vein in the crosscut one night after the shift had quit," Hardrock explained with many a pause to clear his lungs. "He smeared it over with soft talc, so's the shifter wouldn't see it, then hightailed it to Raw-

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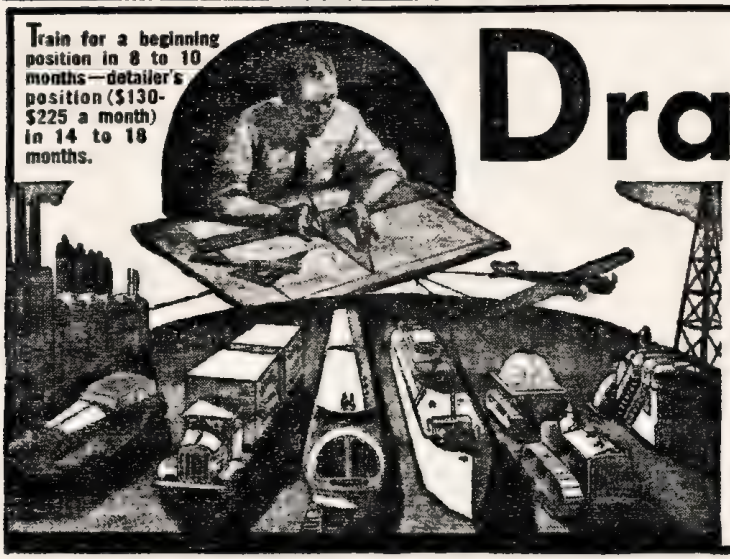

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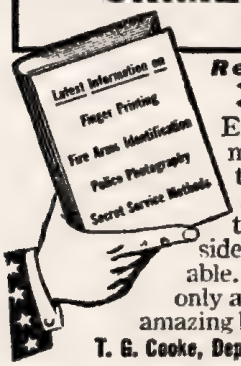

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son and made a deal with him."

"What sort of a deal?"

"He's lying!" Rawson raved.

"A deal to cave the crosscut and force you to sell out for a song," Hardrock continued. "Then Rawson was to clean out the cave-in and open the vein. Slim's share was to be a quarter int'rest in the Mercury May."

Jim turned on Rawson, his face grim. "No wonder you upped your offer. Go on, Hardrock."

Throat and lungs torturing him, Hardrock's croaking dropped to a hoarse whisper as he hurried on:

"Slim beat it back to camp and jerked the wedges out of four sets in the crosscut, this side of the vein, and the next shift them sets caved. But he forgot one important thing, when he yanked them wedges—to brace the next sets. So when the rock caved, it weakened the other sets, shovin' 'em out o' line. They stood the pressure just so long, then caved, ketching the three of us. Slim got a rock on the skull for his pains. He bled like a stuck hawg, and was sure he was gonna croak. But his conscience hit him a harder wallop than the rock."

Emotion rendered Jim's voice husky. "Hardrock, this puts me pretty deep in debt to you."

"You don't owe me but a week's wages," Hardrock wheezed.

"If you hadn't gone back into the mine and lied to the shifter, I'd have sold out to Rawson, and Slim Scully would now hold a quarter interest in the Mercury May."

Hardrock shrugged. "Well, mebbe I did help a little. But what of it?"

"Just this," Jim said quietly. "I haven't sold out, and I've still got the controlling interest in the Mercury, but a quarter of it belongs to you." Then his blue eyes twinkled. "And since we're going to be partners, I'll be able to keep an eagle eye on you, you old war horse."

THE END.

Matt Carson had one more chance to prove he could ride 'em high and scratch 'em fancy for he knew disaster waited

WHEN YOU GET TO PULLIN' LEATHER

BY STEVE TAPLIN

Out behind Painted Rock's empty rodeo arena with the pale twilight keeping night thrust back, Little Christy Carson reached between the ears of his mount and jerked the blindfold. The wiry little colt stood straddle-legged for a moment, then bounced half-heartedly around the corral.

From the top fence rail beside Bret Crockett, Matt Carson shouted instructions: "Get your hand away from that horn. Watch the bulge of his shoulder muscles. Rock in the saddle as you rowel."

Little Christy's freckled face screwed up with concentration as he awkwardly obeyed his father's teachings. He waved his hat and tipped back and forth in the saddle and he kept trying to determine the jump of the colt by the telltale tensing of the shoulder muscles. But his head kept snapping back and he found himself looking up at the Big Horn mountainpeaks most of the time.

Bret Crockett stole a glance at Matt Carson, then looked away and shook his head. It was tough when a man didn't know when he was through. Matt had no business in this game any more. If he could only be stopped before something happened!

The colt stopped pitching and stood blowing. Little Christy slid from the saddle and led the animal over. He was breathing heavily and excitement flushed his cheeks. He looked up at his father and uncle and said seriously, "This bronc's dynamite but I rode 'im fancy and scratched 'im high."

Matt Carson grinned pridefully. His boy was observant. He could speak the rodeo language and he knew a bucking cowl from a Spanish bit. Matt almost laughed out loud, but the restless stir of Bret Crockett beside him choked it off. It wasn't as funny as Matt thought. His grin died and his lips thinned.

Christy was saying to Bret, "I'll be as good as my dad some day."

"Better," said Bret. "You could mount him on Aces Wild and then

ride a mule yourself and win points from him."

Matt turned sharply on Bret to see what he meant by that. The big man in broadcloth was looking down at the boy and the gathering gloom held his secret.

"Walk him and dry him off," Matt ordered Christy, "before you put him away. Hurry now."

Christy started to turn away, then spun back. "You riding tomorrow, dad?"

Matt let the silence run for a moment. Bret shifted his weight on the rail. "Yes," said Matt.

Christy led the colt toward the stables.

When the youngster was out of earshot, Bret turned to Matt. "You can still go to work for me," he said.

"Bronc peeler for a horse ranch," said Matt dryly. "One-fifty a month. I can win that much in a single event following the shows."

"Sure," agreed Bret narrowly. "But my broncs aren't doped into being killers. Some are a little tough but most of those mustangs just sunfish a little. Your time would be pretty much your own—"

"My time's my own now," snapped Matt. "I'm doing pretty good. You know I've won two straight firsts—"

"In shows you wouldn't even have gone to see when you were on top," Bret reminded him. "Better come to the ranch with me, Matt."

Matt stared out across the night-shrouded bucking pens and said a little angrily, "Quit dogging me, Bret. Ever since she passed away you've been trying to get me to come to the ranch." His tone softened and he laid a big-knuckled hand on Crockett's knee. "You're more like a brother than a brother-in-law, but leave me alone, Bret."

Matt slid off the fence rail and started toward the stables. Bret called to him, "I'm going home after the show tomorrow."

Matt didn't answer, he just kept on going.

UP in their little room above the Shoshone Bar, Matt scraped together the dinner while Christy splashed the corral dust from his face. Now and then Matt paused and listened. The cheap tunes of a tinny piano came up through the floor with the sound of poker chips and raucous bawls of drunken men. Now and then a heavy oath shot through the floor like a bullet. Matt's lips were thin when he scraped the beans and fried bannock onto the plates and called Christy.

The youngster sat across the table from his father and wolfed his food. Between mouthfuls he said, "Did you ever ride Aces Wild, dad? Were you ever up on him, huh?"

Matt nodded. "When I was the big attraction for Wild Jack Body's show."

"Bet there wasn't a buster that sat him any prettier than you!" exclaimed Christy. "Boy, I can see yuh. Coming out of the chute scratchin' him from withers to flanks, slappin' your hat around like you were in a rockin' chair. And when the whistle blowed you slipped off him as easy as a fella would slip off a log. That so, dad?"

Again Matt nodded. "Rode him to a standstill every time."

Christy waved his fork in the air. "You'll show 'em tomorrow on Blue Bolt and High Heap, won't yuh? The waddies around here won't ever have seen such ridin'."

Matt looked down at his plate. He'd almost forgotten he'd promised Christy he'd ride tomorrow. He'd have to hunt up Joe Ringo tonight and speak to him about it.

When the meal was done, Matt let Christy scrape up the dishes and begin the washing. "I'm going out for a while," he said. "If I'm not back right away, you go to bed."

He left the room and went down the rickety steps to the main street of Painted Rock. It was filled with rigs and horses. The surrounding country had come to town for the three-day show. Matt went up the boardwalk to the Crystal Palace and shouldered through the swinging doors. He found Joe Ringo at the far end of the bar having a drink with a couple of house men. The gamblers moved away when Matt came up.

"I want to ride in the bucking contest tomorrow," said Matt bluntly.

Joe Ringo rolled his crooked black cheroot into the corner of his thick lips. "You crazy?" he asked. "I'm running a show, not a slaughter-house. The prize money I put up gets me the cream—"

"Prize money?" echoed Matt.

Joe Ringo hooked his fat thumbs in his checkered vest pockets and chewed the end of the cheroot. "Maybe the money isn't for a big-timer like you," he said condescendingly, "but it's big dough for this neck of the woods. It brings out the cream of the local riders. And I ain't having my show ruined by a waddy that's started pullin' leather. Why don't you get a job on some ranch stitching saddles?"

"A little leather pullin' couldn't ruin this cheap, tinhorn burlesque you call a rodeo," said Matt hotly. "You could glue your riders in the saddle and it wouldn't be any funnier."

Joe Ringo's florid cheeks took on a deeper hue. "You ride tomorrow," he said flatly. "I'll see that you draw Blue Bolt and High Heap."

"They're the top horses of your show," said Matt.

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"I'll have the doc there beside the chute," Joe grunted.

As Matt turned from the bar one of the percentage girls tried to intercept him, but he stepped around her and pushed through the swinging doors. He threaded his way down the boardwalk and into the Shoshone Bar. Over his first two straight whiskies, he brooded about what Joe Ringo had said. Pulling leather; get a job stitching saddles; the doctor would be by the chute. Joe Ringo and Bret Crockett would make a good pair. Bret always hammered at him, too. He was only thirty-two.

The bartender here knew him from the time he used to come through on the big circuit. As the apron poured his glass full again, he asked, "Who's the best rider you ever saw, Steve?"

"It was a toss-up between you and the Wyoming Kid, Matt," answered the bartender.

There it was. Matt Carson and the Wyoming Kid. Two of the best bronc toppers ever to come scratching out of a chute. Matt stared into the amber fluid of his glass and tried to remember when the Kid had died. He guessed it was about three years ago. Got scared one day and held to the horn when he should have let the bronc pitch him off.

What did the kids along the bar know about topping broncs? Their only assets were saddle shines on their breeches and high-heeled boots.

Matt looked down the bar and raised his voice, "You snivelin' kids think you can ride?"

The buzz of the place stopped and heads turned toward him through the smoke haze. Nobody said anything, they just looked. Then with kind of embarrassed shifting, they all went back to talking again. Matt looked down at his half-empty glass.

Bret Crockett had to touch him twice on the shoulder to get him to

look up. "What are you doing here?" he asked.

Matt shook Bret's hand off, answering, "None of your business. Thought you were going back to your spread."

"Tomorrow evening, Matt. Better come along."

The bartender came up and filled Matt's glass at a nod. "You hear that?" Matt asked him. "My brother-in-law wants me to come to his ranch and peel wild broncs."

"Might be good idea," said the bartender.

"He's kidding," Matt chuckled to Bret. "Steve, here, has seen me ride. He compares me with the Wyoming Kid. That right, Steve?"

"When I saw you both ride," said Steve cautiously.

"Come on, Matt, let's get out of here." Bret tried to pull him away.

"That's right, get him out of here," Joe Ringo's voice cut in harshly. "He's had enough."

Matt turned at that and fixed slitted eyes on the rodeo owner. "Enough of you," he swore heavily. "You and your two-bit shows."

"Go get some sleep if you want to ride tomorrow," said Joe.

"He's all right, Ringo," Bret answered. "I'll take care of him."

Matt shuttled his eyes scornfully between the two. "So I need wet-nursin' now, eh? For a peeler who can top anything with hide, horns or feathers, anyone would think I was ready for the infirmary."

"Go home," ordered Ringo flatly. "And give yourself a talking to on the way. You're finished in this business. You've taken to pullin' leather in a rocking chair so you won't fall out of it. You couldn't ride Ol' Betsy that pulls the rake to smooth the arena. You're done."

Matt lunged forward and swung his fist. Joe Ringo just stepped back and laughed. "Get out of here," he repeated. "And remember, you're riding tomorrow. You asked to. I'm going to sit on the fence and watch you choke the horn half to death. And when you chaw dust maybe you'll realize what's happened to you."

Bret got hold of Matt and guided him from the saloon. He sided the broncbuster up the rickety stairs and saw him to the door of his room. "I'll see you just before I leave tomorrow night," Bret said and went back down the stairs.

Matt stood by the door for a moment feeling pretty empty inside. Then he let himself in quietly and went to the little cot there by the window. The light of the tawny moon threw an oblong of silver over the sleeping Christy. His lips were slightly parted by regular breathing and his little button nose krinkled a little as he dreamed. Matt stood there for a moment looking at him and listening to the tinny noise beat up from below. Slowly, wearily, he went to the pulled-down bed and took off his clothes.

OUT behind the bucking corral, Matt Carson strapped on his big roweled spurs. Waves of noise swept through the air as events transpired out there in the arena. This morning a wagon had traversed the main street of Painted Rock with the megaphoned driver bellowing the main attraction of the afternoon: "Matt Carson, world's champion broncbuster, up on Blue Bolt and High Heap!"

Matt thought of that now. The announcement had made people stop and listen. The stands had filled early. They had come to see a world's champion top the two meanest broncs in the State. Matt hitched

at his trousers and walked toward the bucking chute.

Joe Ringo and his cronies were hanging on the rails. Old Pappy Slake was looking over the saddles to see there were no frayed cinches or gear that was liable to break and give a rider an unlooked-for spill.

"I didn't think you'd come," said Joe Ringo. His companions laughed.

"I'm ready," said Matt tightly. It was all he could do to keep from balling a fist and smashing it into that florid face.

"I'm sending you out on Broken Hinge first," said Ringo. "You'll need the warm-up to loosen the old kinks." His friends laughed again.

Matt nodded and climbed the chute side as the horse was hazed in and Slake screwed the saddle on. The announcer bawled: "Matt Carson coming out on Broken Hinge, the animal whose fore and rear flap like swinging doors. Watch for him at the number one bucking chute!"

Matt threw a leg over and settled down. "Let me have him," he said to Slake.

The gate swung and the horse bolted like someone had struck its rump with a knife. Just clear of the chute, it started skyward.

A *whoosh* of air tore from Matt's throat as the animal lit stiff-legged. The first hump had caught him by surprise. He whipped off his hat and started it waving. His spurs reached for the withers and raked to the flanks as the squealing bronc leaped and twisted and came thundering down. He stared fixedly at the shoulder muscles. He wasn't getting the timing just right. Several times it was pure instinct that kept light from showing under his breeches. For a second he lost the rhythm and missed with his spurs. It wasn't obvious, even to trained bronc peelers, but he had missed. He became a little frightened and it was all he could do to keep from grabbing at the saddlehorn. When the ten-second whistle blew and the pick-up men ranged alongside him, he was grateful for their help down.

He stood and bowed through force of habit as the applause swept across the arena. But his eyes weren't on the crowd. They were on the ground, clouded with thought. Slowly he went back to the bucking chute and stood there while the best of the local riders rode a horse called Bell Ringer. Matt didn't watch the ride. He could tell by the crowd sounds how the kid was doing. He turned and looked up at the score board when the ride was done. The points went up. They had given him eight hundred and fifty. The local rider had made but four eighty.

Then the announcer was megaphoning again: "Matt Carson on Blue Bolt, the horse of horses. No one has ever successfully ridden this mount to the whistle. A killer."

Matt climbed up the chute side again and settled down into the saddle. Pappy Slake whispered in his ear: "You all right, Matt?"

That snapped Matt out of the daze. He saw the hammerlike head of the horse he was astride, felt the powerful springs in its body that quivered to be released. He saw something else, too. Something that made him smile a little thinly. He didn't have it any more. He was done. A man was usually an old-timer in this game at thirty. Remember the Wyoming Kid? Matt was thirty-two. He raised his head to Slake and said, "Ready."

The gate swung, but Blue Bolt didn't wait to clear it. He climbed for the sky and came down on his haunches. Matt fought to help the horse keep its balance, but they rolled over into the dust. The stands

choked off their rising shout, then took it up again as the horse scrambled to its feet with Matt still in the saddle.

The roaring of pulsing blood wiped all sound from Matt's ears. He waved his hat and scratched his spurs and grimly watched those shoulder muscles. His temples seemed to inflate and deflate like balloons. His chest and stomach bulged and twisted as if bones would protrude out through the skin at any moment. He kept his seat in the leather by using all the lore at his command, rode by sheer instinct even after blood began spurting from his nose and sweat blinded his eyes. He didn't hear the whistle or feel the strong arms that swept him from the saddle. He was still riding when the pick-up men set him down, still determined not to touch the horn.

Solid earth returned his senses. The stands were mad, their cheering rolling clear to the Big Horns. Dazedly, he turned and looked at the score board. They were putting up one thousand points. A perfect ride. That gave him eighteen hundred and fifty points. A fellow was lucky to get that many in his three tries.

He looked back at the chutes and then toward the grandstand. He

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saw Bret Crockett sitting there by the wall with little Christy. This was the time to quit. Quit when he was on top. Matt walked over to the grandstand and scaled the wall.

"Perfect ride, dad," Christy was screaming. "Guess you showed 'em."

Matt said quietly to Bret, "That job of peelin' still open on your spread?"

"We can leave now," answered Bret.

Matt nodded. He looked at Christy and saw the youngster's attention was on the next ride. "I got to thinking that rooms above saloons wasn't good for him," Matt said to Bret. "Ranch life would be much better. I wanted to grab the horn out there, wanted to pull leather—" He stopped, embarrassed, but glad he had admitted it. It seemed to snap something inside him.

He reached down and got Christy by the hand. "Come on, son," he said. "You and I are going to work for Uncle Bret."

"Bronc peelin'?" yipped the youngster. "Say, you'll sure show 'em how it's done, dad. Yip-e-e! I always wanted to live at the ranch."

Before Matt began working his way through the people who were rushing to slap him on the back, he heard Joe Ringo calling for him to return and ride High Heap. Matt just shouted, "Send the first money out to Bret Crockett's Circle C. I got me a job stitching saddles."

The crowd pounded him pretty hard as he worked through them, but it didn't mean a thing now. He was done. But he had quit on top. He wasn't like the Wyoming Kid, not knowing when he had enough.

He looked down at his son. This kid whose hand he held would make a good rider. At that, his father hadn't been so bad in his day.

THE END

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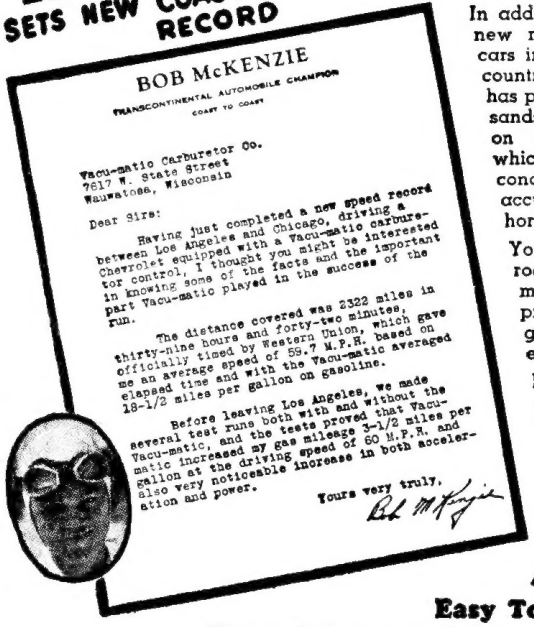

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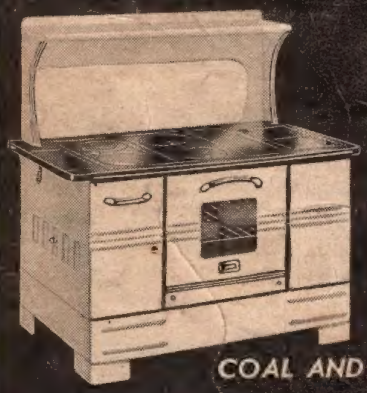

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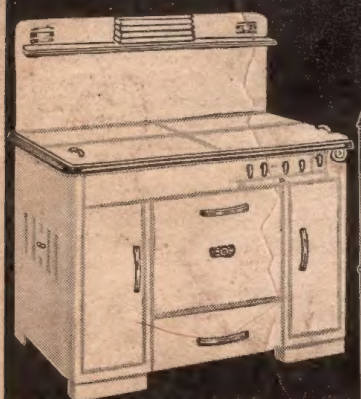

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